



The Heart of a Mystery
by Mrs. L. T. Meade &
Robert Eustace

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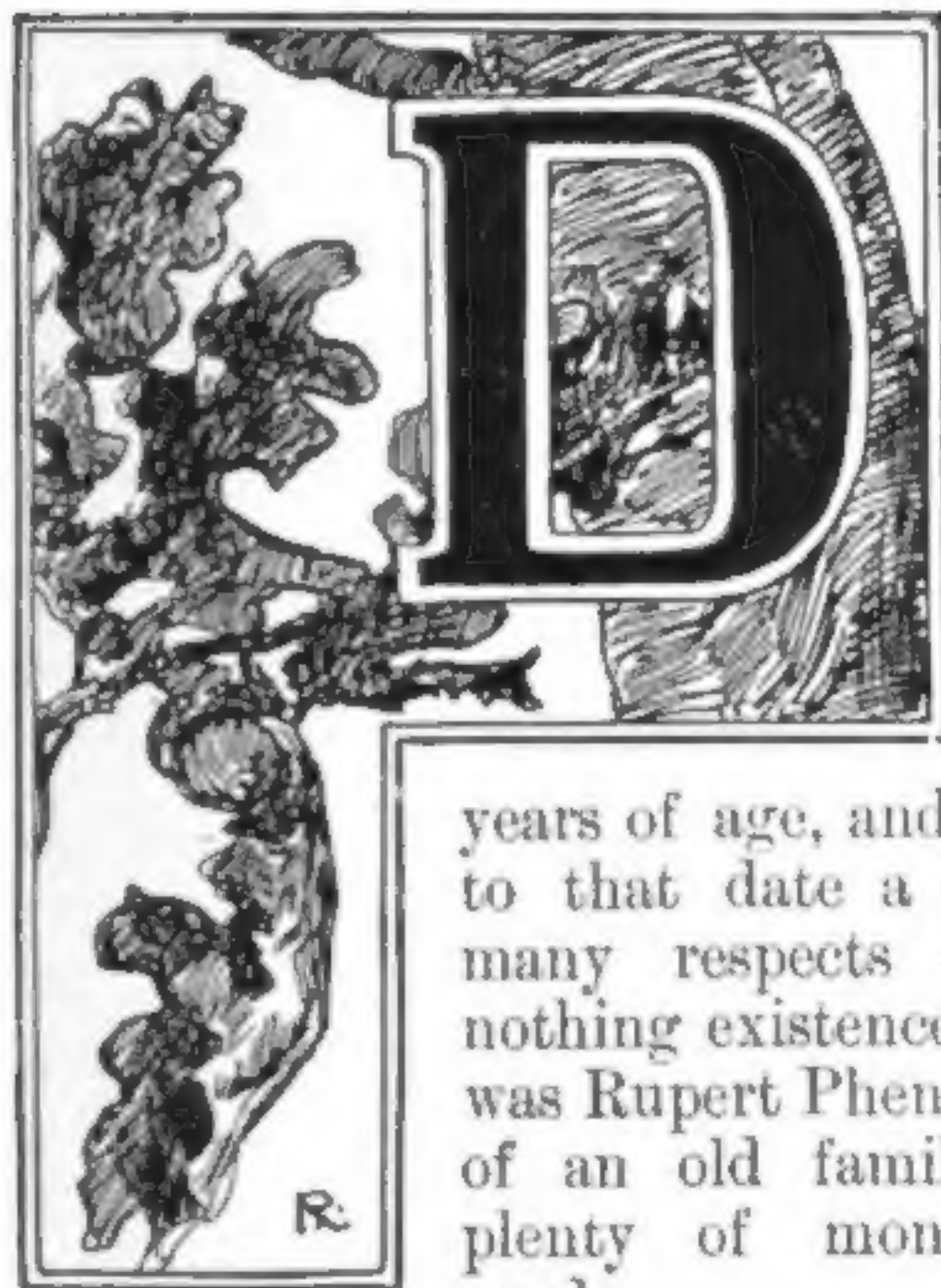
The Heart of a Mystery by Mrs. L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace
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THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.*

No. I.—MADEMOISELLE DELACOURT.



DEATH had summoned my friend Maurice Escott, and I was called to Paris at a moment's notice. I was thirty

years of age, and had led up to that date a lazy and in many respects a good-for-nothing existence. My name was Rupert Phenays. I came of an old family, and had plenty of money for my needs.

It was on the 5th of February, 1898, that I received the telegram, and little did I guess as I opened it that with one leap I was to spring into a totally new life. I, who had not the slightest experience of danger, whose blood had never been quickened by a single heart-beat into undue excitement, was henceforth to be the victim of a strange mystery. I was to know tragedy, pain, and the extreme of peril.

I was standing in the bay window of my luxurious sitting-room in Half Moon Street when my servant brought me a telegram on a salver. I tore it open. It ran as follows:—

"Dying. Come at once.—Escott."

I had known Escott all my days. I was fond of him. He was a first-rate fellow in every sense of the word—handsome to look at, brave, and in all his actions straight as a die. Where I was lacking in energy, he was full of go and spirit. Nevertheless, friends that we were, there was a secret in connection with his life which I had never been able to discover. He was, I knew, a very busy man, but in what sort of manner he occupied his

time, or in what way he earned his income, for he had no private means, was a secret he had never divulged. He was strangely, remarkably sensitive on the point, and, knowing that such was the case, I had long ceased to worry him.

Such a telegram was immediately to be obeyed. I took the night mail to Paris, and early the following morning drove up in hot haste to Escott's apartments in the Rue de Rivoli. The door was opened by my friend's valet, who knew me well.

"How is your master, Valentine?" I asked.

The man shook his head.

"I am sorry to say he is very bad, sir; the doctor does not give the slightest hope. I am glad, Mr. Phenays, that you are in time."

"Pray let the nurse know that I have arrived," was my next remark.

The man ushered me into a sitting-room. A moment later a tall young woman dressed as a nurse came in.

"You are in time, Mr. Phenays. Mr. Escott has been asking for you at intervals all night. He is very ill, but your presence will comfort him."

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"The patient is in the last stage of double pneumonia. The doctor, Professor Thesiger, who is attending him, and who is an Englishman, gave up all hope a few hours ago. Will you follow me, sir?"

The nurse led the way into a darkened room. As soon as I got accustomed to the dim light, I looked on the face of my friend, and knew that both doctor and nurse were right. Escott was breathing with extreme difficulty, and there was a dusky hue under his eyes and round his lips. When I first bent over him, his eyes were shut, but the next instant he opened them with a restless movement, saw me, and a smile lit up his face.

"Thank God! Rupert, you have come," he said. "I must speak to you at once and alone. I have not a moment to lose. Please leave us, nurse."

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The woman withdrew from the room. When the door had closed behind her, Escott raised himself with some difficulty in bed. A flicker of strength came into his voice, and his eyes grew bright.

"I have come to the end, old man," he said. "I am within a few moments of solving the great secret. Do not waste time condoling with me; there is something I must tell you quickly. You have often wondered what my life has been. I never told you, but it is necessary to tell you now. I am one of the agents of the British Secret Service."

I listened to these words in astonishment. I had always heard of the Secret Service, and knew well that to belong to it meant danger and difficulty.

"You may thank Heaven that up to the present you have known nothing of what I have lived through," continued Escott. "Men in my profession have to obtain their strange knowledge at fearful risks. Yes, my life has been one of danger; and now, Phenays, I am about to transfer that danger to you. You must not shrink nor hesitate; there is no course in honour open to you but to accept the charge which I am about to confide in you. When you know my secret, you, too, will be at the mercy of men without scruple and without conscience. But I put this burden on you, Phenays, because you are an Englishman, and for the sake of our country."

His voice sank to a whisper. I gave him a spoonful of a restorative which stood near.



"She fell on her knees by the dying man's side."

It revived him, and he continued, his words coming out now in gasps.

"You will do what I want, Phenays?"

"Yes," I replied.

I spoke with earnestness, and my words comforted him.

"I knew I was right in appealing to you," he said. "Now listen. A fortnight ago it was my misfortune to obtain possession of a political secret of such gravity that if even a suspicion of its existence were breathed, it would cause a European crisis. There is only one who knows that I know this secret. That man is a certain Monsieur Laroque, a French

chemist, a man of remarkable learning and power. He is altogether my friend in this matter. Immediately after my death you must go to my cabinet in my sitting-room; you will find a letter there addressed to him. Take it to him and act in concert with him over this grave matter."

"But what is the secret?" I asked.

"Listen. I was present, but unknown, a fortnight back, at a secret conference between the President of the French Republic and the agent of the Czar of Russia. The substance of what I heard was that in the event of war between England and the Transvaal, Russia and France would—but come closer. No, do not write anything, for Heaven's sake! it would not be safe. Listen, and do not forget. There are three generals of the French Army, General Romville, General——"

There was a sudden movement at the door, a few words of entreaty and expostulation fell on our ears, and the next instant a tall girl, with evidences of great excitement on her face, burst into the room.

The name of General Romville must have fallen on her ears. She rushed to the bedside, and the horror on her face was painful to witness.

"I am in time," she said. "Send him away, Maurice, and tell me what you want. Tell me what has burdened your last moments!"

She fell on her knees by the dying man's side and buried her face in her hands. Escott gave her a glance of despair. Then he looked at me, and then a sudden change came over his face. His lips made an effort to speak, but no words were audible. His breath came in hurried gasps and then stopped. He was dead.

"You have killed him!" I said, turning to the girl and speaking in hot anger. "Why did you force yourself into the room? You do not know what you have done."

"I know perfectly well," she replied. She had risen to her feet. Her face was as white as the white face of my dead friend. "I meant to be with him at the very end," she said. "I had the right."

I stared at her in consternation.

"He was telling you something important when I entered the room," she continued. "It was a secret. Now listen. That secret was meant for me. I know what it was about, for I caught the words 'General Romville.' Will you tell it to me now, for it is my right to know."

Her words were interrupted by the nurse, who entered the room.

"Mr. Escott is dead," I said, turning to the woman. "The entrance of this young lady was the final shock—you had no right to admit her."

"I told Mademoiselle what the consequences would be," said the nurse. "She went to the sitting-room first. What were you doing, mademoiselle? How did you come by the key of my master's cabinet? I found it on the floor."

"Give it to me," I said eagerly.

The nurse handed it to me without a word. As she did so Mademoiselle regarded her with grave, wide-open eyes. There was a half-despairing, half-vindictive expression on her face. Notwithstanding the fact that I had just lost my dearest friend, it was the sort of look to haunt a man, to fill him with uneasiness.

I left the room where Escott lay dead and went straight to his sitting-room. The first thing I did was to walk to the cabinet and open it. I meant to take out the letter which he had told me I should find there, the letter addressed to M. Laroque. Search as I would, I could not see it anywhere. I opened drawer after drawer. Had the strange girl, whose name I did not even know, taken it?

This thought had scarcely come to me before the door was opened and she came in.

"Mr. Phenays," she said, "I have come to ask your pardon. Please forgive me if I spoke with intemperance. The fact is, I was very much upset at seeing you in the room with Maurice Escott. I wanted to be alone with him during his last moments. I had my reason."

"Whatever that reason was, mademoiselle," I replied, "I still very deeply regret your having burst into the room in the intemperate way you did; but, however much we may deplore it, we cannot call the dead back to life. Now, I have a question to ask you. The nurse said she found the key of this cabinet on the floor; she further said that you had been in the room. Did you open the cabinet and take from thence a letter? If you did, please return it to me immediately. It was entrusted to me by my friend, and was addressed to a man he had business connections with."

"I took no letter," she answered haughtily. "What do you take me for?"

"You are a stranger to me," I answered. "Your actions since you came into this house have astonished me; forgive me if I am over-suspicious."

"You had better know at once who I

am," she replied. "My name is Francesca Delacourt. My father, who is dead, was a Frenchman, but my mother was English. I have known Mr. Escott for a long time. I can scarcely realise that he is dead. Whatever secret he told you was meant for me. May I share the confidence which he gave you on his deathbed?"

"I have nothing whatever to tell you," I answered. "I should be glad if you would leave me now, for I am upset and shocked."

"I will certainly go," she replied. "As to your being shocked, if you know what I think you know, you have reason for your emotion."

She turned, walked to the door, went out, and closed it behind her.

I was alone, and I tried to collect my troubled thoughts. Escott had died without having told me his secret. The letter which he had written to M. Laroque could not be found. Mademoiselle Delacourt seemed to be mixed up in the affair. I distrusted her. I felt certain, that, although she denied it, she had really stolen the letter which was addressed to M. Laroque. What that letter contained, God only knew. It was terrible to feel that my poor friend's most dangerous secret might have got into wrong hands. An agent of the British Secret Service is a man scarcely to be envied; he becomes acquainted with matters which touch big interests, often affecting the welfare of nations. Escott declared that his was a most dangerous secret; he was about to tell it to me, when death, caused by Mademoiselle Delacourt's abrupt entrance, prevented him.

I was musing on these thoughts when the doctor arrived. He was an Englishman, with a clever face, of about forty years of age. I told him that his patient was dead.

"I expected it," was his answer. "Did you arrive in time, Mr. Phenays?"

"Yes and no," was my answer. "He sent me a wire, as, perhaps, you know; he had something to confide in me, but died before his confidence was complete."

"Indeed! How sad! Where are you staying?"

"I was going to the Continental. I must return to London immediately after the funeral."

"Pray make my house your home, Mr. Phenays. I have apartments in the Rue St. Honoré. Bring your things, for we shall be quite quiet."

After a moment's thought I decided to accept this invitation. I went, therefore, that afternoon to Thesiger's rooms, and in

the evening the doctor and I dined together. During the meal I asked him a few questions with regard to my dead friend.

"Did you know Escott well? Did you see much of him?" was my first query.

"A good deal," replied Dr. Thesiger. "He was always rather a reserved sort of fellow, but he often came over here to smoke and have a chat. During the last few weeks he seemed to be seriously troubled and to have something weighing on his mind."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and I think that something lessened his chance of recovery. When I told him yesterday that his illness was likely to take a serious turn, he immediately asked me to wire for you. I am sorry you were not in time to receive his confidence."

"Alas! I was not."

Thesiger gave me a keen glance; his eyes met mine—I saw a gleam of curiosity in them.

"There was a great deal of mystery about him, poor fellow," he continued. "He never even told me what his business was. Was he conscious at the end?"

"Yes," I said slowly.

"And yet he did not relieve his mind?"

"He was prevented."

"How?"

"A girl forced her way into the room."

"Mr. Phenays! A girl? What girl?"

"Mademoiselle Francesca Delacourt."

"Ah! I know Mademoiselle Delacourt. What do you mean?"

"She rushed in uninvited. My friend was interrupted in an important confidence; her entrance agitated him. He passed away a moment later."

Thesiger's face looked grave and stern.

"Do you know this young lady?" I asked.

"Yes; I think everyone does. She is a beautiful and clever woman. Her father belonged to one of the best old French families. She goes everywhere; her beauty and position give her the *entrée* wherever she wills."

"Do you like her, doctor?"

"Yes," he replied, but I noted a certain reserve in his tone.

"You mean 'No,' Dr. Thesiger," I said boldly.

"You may take my answer then to mean both 'Yes' and 'No,'" was his reply.

"Please tell me exactly what you know about her."

"I should advise you, Phenays, to have nothing to do with her. She is said to have the power of arousing keen interest in most



"Mademoiselle was standing in the shade of a lamp."

men to whom she accords her friendship. It is rumoured that she has considerable political influence, and that her greatest friends belong to the Diplomatic Corps."

"The Diplomatic Corps!" I replied.

"Yes."

I sat silent, but a thrill of mingled pain and fear had run through me. Could Mademoiselle really know Escott's secret? Had she interrupted his confidence on purpose? At that moment a servant entered with a card on a salver. Thesiger glanced at it and then, with a curious smile on his face, handed it to me. It bore the name of Mademoiselle Francesca Delacourt.

"This is curious," I said.

"I will go and see what she wants," said the doctor. "If she should have learnt that you are here, Phenays, and asks to see you, what shall I say?"

"I will see her," I replied.

Thesiger was absent a minute or two. His face looked grave when he returned.

"Mademoiselle has managed to trace you here," he said. "With what motive I am unable to say. She wishes to see you immediately. Will you give her an interview? You are, of course, at liberty to refuse."

"I will see her," I said.

"If you will take my advice, Phenays, you will be careful."

"I shall be very careful," I answered.

Thesiger now led the way to his library. He opened the door for me, and I entered.

Mademoiselle was standing in the shade of a lamp. She wore full dinner dress, covered with a long opera cloak, lined with rich silk of a rosy hue.

"Nothing but the utmost necessity, Mr. Phenays, would make me intrude myself on you at a moment like this," she began.

"Your business?" I interrupted.

"I will tell you in as few words as possible. You were a great friend of Mr. Escott's, were you not?"

"His greatest friend, mademoiselle."

"May I ask if you had any idea as to the nature of his profession?"

As Mademoiselle uttered these words I watched her face closely. Notwithstanding all her efforts to wear a mask of utter indifference, I noticed on her smooth young features an expression of anxiety, joined to what might almost be called fear.

"I certainly knew about my friend," I answered. "But, pardon me, what affair is it of yours?"

"I will soon explain. Please listen. Mr. Escott was a member of the British Secret

Service. You know that fact, so do I. Less than an hour before I reached his house I received an urgent message from him to come at once, as he had a matter of the utmost importance to tell me. I came on the scene just too late; he was giving you his confidence. Did he say anything about me?"

"He did not."

"Then did he tell you that secret of great importance?"

"I decline to discuss the question, mademoiselle."

Her eyes flashed an angry fire and her face hardened.

"Mr. Phenays," she said earnestly, "you are unknowingly putting yourself into danger. I use the word advisedly; it is my duty to warn you. The Secret Service requires much of its votaries. The communication Mr. Escott made to you was not a pleasant one for you to receive; he only told you because I was not present. Beyond doubt his instructions were that you were to deliver the message to me."

"You are mistaken," I answered. "Those were not his instructions."

As I spoke I walked to the door and held it wide open.

"I think, mademoiselle, our conference has come to an end."

To my amazement she changed colour, the hard look left her face, her eyes filled with tears, which rolled over and ran down her cheeks.

"I spoke hastily," she exclaimed. "I am always hasty, always excitable, unfit, most unfit for that which—which I have undertaken; but you are so cold, so suspicious. Why do you not trust me? Do you think I would injure him?"

"I will be truthful with you," I replied.

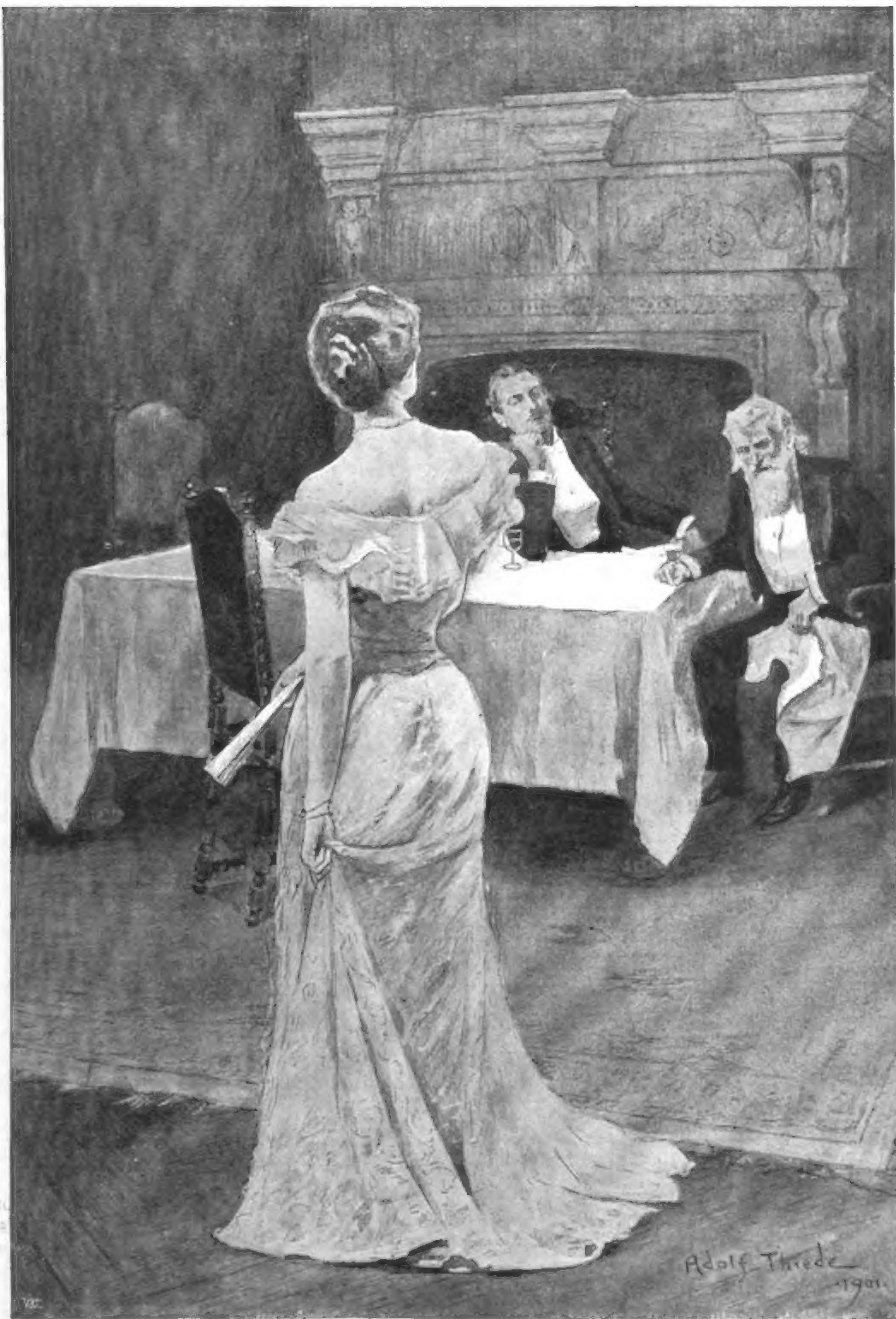
"My friend was about to confide a secret to me, but your entrance prevented it ever reaching his lips. I shall never know what he wanted to say. It was your fault. He sought to relieve his mind, and the secret may have been of consequence—that I am unprepared to say. I have never heard it; it can, therefore, never be imparted to you."

She smiled.

"Do you really think that I believe you?" she answered. "Did I not with my own ears hear words to convince me of the contrary? You will be sorry for this. Are you leaving Paris at once?"

"After the funeral."

She gave me a curious stare, but did not speak. Without offering her hand she left the room.



"She turned and looked at me again."

On the day of the funeral I received a letter. It was directed in a strange hand, was enclosed in a black-edged envelope, and bore the mark of a Paris suburb. The words in it were typewritten, and were in the French tongue. They ran as follows:—

"We are well aware that your friend, before he died, told you his secret. Understand that if you divulge that secret to the British Government, or if in any way it reaches their ears, you are a dead man. No human precautions and no human laws can possibly protect you. We shall know at once by the steps the British Government will take on receipt of the intelligence whether they have learnt the secret or not. Therefore BEWARE."

I read this strange letter twice, at first with bewilderment, then with growing interest. One of two things had happened: either I was the victim of a pitiable and laboured jest, or I had received a threat of some seriousness. In either case, the letter, being anonymous, must be disregarded. My thoughts naturally flew to Mademoiselle Delacourt. Could she have written the letter? I dismissed the notion as impossible. But if she were not the author, who was? for who else knew that I was with Escott?

Just then the words the poor fellow had said on his deathbed recurred to my memory.

"My life has been in great danger, and that danger I hand to you when I tell you my secret."

A shudder ran through me.

"I must consult my London lawyer about this," I said to myself, and I rose from my chair in Thesiger's sitting-room with the intention of packing my things. Just then a servant entered with a letter.

"By messenger, sir," he said briefly.

I tore open the letter. It was in a handwriting quite unknown to me.

"Another anonymous communication," I said to myself. "What does it mean?"

I turned quickly to the signature of the second letter, and then I gave a start of relief. The letter was headed "Château Laroque," and at the end was the signature "Edouard Laroque." These were the contents of the letter:—

"MY DEAR SIR,

"I have just heard, to my infinite distress, of my friend Escott's death. I received a letter from him a few days ago telling me that he was about to send for you in order

to entrust a secret of great importance to your keeping. Now, as I know all about the matter, I am anxious to see you at once. My house is situated four kilometres outside the village of Bévallon. A train leaves the Gare du Nord for Bévallon at five o'clock this evening, arriving at the village at six o'clock. If you can make it convenient to come by that train, a carriage shall meet you and bring you at once to my *château*. Pray do not delay, as the matter is of great urgency.

"Yours faithfully,

"EDOUARD LAROQUE."

I gave a pleased exclamation. This letter was indeed a comfort. Just when I was despairing of ever being able to communicate with M. Laroque, he gave me the opportunity I required.

When Thesiger came in I told him of Laroque's letter, at the same time mentioning that I intended to leave Paris that evening. He did not ask me for any particulars, but said that he would be pleased at any time to serve me and to put me up if I required to come back to the French capital. I reached the Gare du Nord in good time, and my train set me down just about six o'clock at Bévallon.

I found a brougham waiting for me. I entered it and told the man to take me to the Château Laroque.

The sun had just set, and a watery moon was creeping up the sky. As I drove along I could see stretches of marsh and waste land intersected by dykes. The air was damp, and a rising mist rendered distant objects indistinct. Presently the road took a sharp turn and the old Château burst into view. I can vividly recall my impressions as I first saw it. It was a well-preserved feudal fortress, lying in a hollow, and with a wide moat surrounding it. The Château was of the typical Norman type, with round bastions at each corner and surrounded by battlements.

As the carriage drew up at the drawbridge, I alighted, entered the courtyard, and was about to advance to the principal entrance, when, to my amazement, my eyes fell upon the figure of Mademoiselle Francesca Delacourt. She was talking to an elderly man, but when she saw me she came quietly forward, smiling as she did so.

"Ah, Mr. Phenays!" she exclaimed.

"By all that is wonderful," I could not help answering, "how is it that I see you here?"

"You see me here for a very natural reason," was her answer. "I am staying in the house with my godfather. I have known him all my lifetime. You will like him, Mr. Phenays. He is a great chemist, and is making some investigations at the present time for me, for my hobby is also chemistry. The fact is, I am proud to tell

you I have made a small discovery which may be of use to the world.

M. Laroque is helping me to perfect it.

But come,

M. Laroque's letter, gave place to a strange feeling of unaccountable distrust.

Mademoiselle led the way into the old house. We passed down several dark passages, and then paused outside a door covered with green baize. This she flung open, and going in before me, invited me to follow.

Seated by a log fire was an old man, whose bent back and long, grey hair were all I could see.

"How do you do, M. Laroque?" I said, bending towards him. "I have answered your letter in person. I am Mr. Phenays."

As I spoke I noticed that Mademoiselle had left the room. I looked at my host, expecting a word of welcome. He was silent for a moment, then he said gravely

"This is Francesca's doing. But it is good of you, Mr. Phenays, to come."

"Mademoiselle's doing!" I could not help interrupting.



Mr. Phenays, I must not keep you talking any longer; follow me, will you?"

Her manner was courteous and friendly, but a strange despondency came over me as I talked to her, and the comfort which I had hitherto experienced, in the receipt of

"Hastily pushed it behind a velvet curtain."

"Yes; she happened to be present when poor Escott died, and gave me to understand that he had imparted a somewhat serious matter to you. If so, we shall have something to discuss, and I hope you will forgive the liberty a complete stranger takes in summoning you here."

"But there is no liberty," I replied. "On the contrary, I cannot tell you how grateful I am. Poor Escott spoke to me of you on his deathbed, and asked me to communicate with you immediately. He said that he had left a letter addressed to you in his cabinet. I could not find it, and did not know your address, therefore was unable to write to you. Your letter to-day, therefore, makes all straight. I am much relieved."

"I presume, Mr. Phenays, you are now on your way to London, in order to hand on the communication which Escott made to you to the right quarter?"

"I am returning to London," I answered. "But an unfortunate thing happened. Poor Escott's secret was never confided to me; he was about to tell it when he was interrupted."

"How?"

"Miss Delacourt, in what I consider an unwarrantable way, burst into the room. The shock killed him."

"Francesca was always impulsive," said the old man. He paused for a moment and his face looked downcast. "Is it really true," he said then, "that you know nothing?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"And yet someone must act, and at once," continued M. Laroque. "The matter is of vital importance. If I were not a cripple, I could—but there, I am powerless. God only knows what the consequences may be if those scoundrels——"

He broke off, a faint streak of colour in his face.

"Well, sir, I am glad to see you. Your coming is opportune. You will, of course, remain for the night."

"I have come prepared to do so."

"That is well. After dinner I will tell you what I know."

He rang the bell, which was close to his side. An old servant in faded livery appeared. He took me to a room on the second floor. I changed into my dinner dress and came downstairs. I found my host and Mademoiselle in the room. The meal was announced. The old servant Paul gave his arm to my host and conducted him

to the head of the table. During dinner Francesca Delacourt led the conversation. She spoke well in excellent French. My host now and then looked at her with an affectionate smile. She was, beyond doubt, a handsome and attractive woman.

We dined simply, and when the meal came to an end Laroque turned to his god-daughter.

"Francesca," he said, "Mr. Phenays and I are going to the laboratory. We are about to have an important conversation. Can you do without us for a time?"

"Of course I can," she answered. "But, godfather, the laboratory is too damp for you just now. I must go down first and see that it is comfortable."

"Very well, my dear. Turn on the electric light. The room is thoroughly warm, and your idea with regard to its being damp, is—pardon my saying it—nonsense."

She shook her head and her eyes met mine fully. There was something in their glance which again brought back that intense sensation of discomfort and uneasiness which her presence had before produced. She went as far as the door, then she turned and looked at me again.

Her second glance caused a curious tingling in my spine. As I write these words I recall that queer look. There was a strange expression round her mouth, a slight narrowing of her dark, almond-shaped eyes—a peculiar smile, which first lit up the gloomy depths of her eyes, hovered round her lips, and vanished.

A moment later I had forgotten about her, being much entertained by my host's conversation. We chatted for a few minutes, then he turned to me.

"If you will walk down the passage outside this room, Mr. Phenays, and open a baize door at the end, you will find some steps. Pray go down the stairs to the laboratory. I shall be with you in a moment or two."

I immediately proceeded to carry out his instructions. I walked down the passage, opened the baize door, and went downstairs. The whole of the castle was lit with electric light. It looked strangely out of place in this Norman fortress; but Laroque was nothing if not scientific, and the latest improvements in science were, he assured me, always to be found in his house. As I entered the laboratory I started to see that Mademoiselle Delacourt was there. She was bending over a cylinder. When I appeared she hastily pushed it behind a velvet



"Bent near and spoke in a whisper."

curtain ; then she turned, looked at me, and smiled.

"I will leave you and my godfather to your business," she said, and she went away without waiting for me to speak to her.

Curiosity impelled me to walk to the curtain and push it back, in order to see what was behind it. Only two cylinders, which might have contained anything, but were now empty. I vaguely wondered why they were there, and what Mademoiselle Delacourt was doing with them. A weight of gloom and nervousness overpowered me, but my host's footsteps caused me to pull myself together, and the next instant he entered the room.

"Ah," he said, sinking with a sigh into his easy-chair. "Do you know, Phenays, that this is one of the finest laboratories in the neighbourhood of Paris. Here I do all my scientific work. I am quite quiet here and undisturbed ; anyone would think a place of this sort would be damp, for it is only just above the level of the moat, but in reality it is not."

"The air of the room is quite warm and dry," I answered.

"Yes, that is the case," he replied. Then he was silent for a minute. "I am glad you have come, Mr. Phenays," he said then, "for if that secret got into the wrong hands,

it would do the most incalculable and awful mischief. Now, come nearer to me and I will tell you everything. Hullo ! what is that ?"

He had scarcely spoken before we were plunged into darkness ; the electric light had gone out.

"That infernal dynamo has broken down again !" he said. "It is really too bad. Please hand me the matches and we will light a lamp ; you will find them just there on the bench ; run your hand along and you will touch the box."

I rose to comply, guided by a streak of moonlight which entered through a narrow window.

"I cannot find any matches," I said. "Just wait a moment ; I will go to the dining-room and get some."

I opened the door and began to climb the stairs. I had not gone up a dozen steps when I heard him call out—

"All right, here they are ; come back, please."

I had just turned to do so, when a sudden and terrific explosion occurred, an explosion of such awful violence that I felt myself hurled up against the stonework as if by an unseen arm. For a moment I was so stunned that I could scarcely understand what had happened. Then self-control returned to me and I went quickly back to the laboratory. A terrible sight met my gaze. The room was absolutely wrecked, the window-panes and sashes blown out, and the floor strewn with shattered furniture. In one corner, evidently propelled there by the violence of the explosion, lay the body of my poor host. I rushed to raise him up, but one glance was sufficient to show that he was quite dead. I was just about to go for assistance, when Mademoiselle, followed by several servants, hurried in. On seeing me she gave a sharp cry, and I shall never forget the curious look of horror and intense disappointment on her face. Then she seemed to recover herself ; she stood by the door with both hands raised.

"Ah !" she cried, "I warned him ; so it has happened at last."

"What do you mean?" I said. "Can you throw any light on this fearful thing?"

"I can," she replied. "I warned him, but he would never listen. Come upstairs, and I will tell you."

"You shall tell me here," I answered.

"Bring a lamp at once," I continued, turning to the servant.

He turned to obey. Miss Delacourt and I stood facing each other. The moonlight coming in through the shattered windows fell on both our faces. All the distrust I felt for her shone, doubtless, in my eyes. Just for a moment her eyes quailed under my gaze. A man came down with a lamp.

"Now for your explanation," I said.

"Do you doubt my word?" she asked.

"I doubt everything about you," I replied.

"I doubted you from the first moment I saw you; now I doubt you terribly."

"And yet you are wrong," she said; "but some men cannot help being suspicious."

"I await your explanation," I said.

"And I will give it," she said. "Have you ever heard of marsh gas?"

"Certainly."

"Then you will soon be at the bottom of this awful accident. Marsh gas is to be found in places where vegetation decomposes. It is the same thing as fire-damp, which causes so many mining disasters. Its deadliness consists in its not being detectable by any of the senses, as it has no colour or smell; but when mixed with the air it forms one of the most explosive gaseous mixtures there is. Now, I have often suspected that this gas found its way into M. Laroque's laboratory from the moat. Of course, even if it did come in, he would be safe as long as only the electric light was burning; but any

unguarded flame, even that caused by the lighting of a match, would bring on an explosion. But why were you not also present when the explosion took place?"

"I went to find some matches," I answered. "The electric light went out suddenly. I could not find the match-box, and went upstairs to get some. Mademoiselle, why did the light go out? What were you doing when you bent over the cylinder? Why did you push it behind the curtain? I looked behind the curtain when you left the room, and found two cylinders: they may have contained compressed air or anything."

She turned white.

"You will be sorry for this," she said.

"Your suspicions are past enduring." She turned and left the room.

How I spent the rest of that night I can scarcely tell, but towards morning I went to my bedroom and lay down without undressing. I had scarcely dropped asleep before I was aroused by someone touching me. Looking up, I saw the old servant Paul.

"The carriage is at the door, sir. A train for Paris leaves Bévallon in less than an hour. I will drive you to the station. You are not safe in this house, Mr. Phenays."

"In Heaven's name what do you mean?" I asked.

He bent near and spoke in a whisper.

"May God forgive me if I am wrong, sir, but I must speak. There was nothing the matter with the dynamo. I saw Mademoiselle with her own hands turn off the current."

I raised myself on my elbow and stared hard at the old servant.

"I will take your advice, Paul," I said, "and get back to Paris at once."



THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.*

No. II.—A LITTLE SMOKE.



LOOKING back on my startling experience, I come to the conclusion that in the whole of England there were probably few men in a stranger position than I, Rupert Phenays, when, on a certain dull February morning, I found myself, after my brief visit to Paris, once more back in London. In that visit all my life had been changed. I had gone to Paris to see my greatest friend, who, in struggling to tell me a terrible and important secret, had died. Agents of the French Secret Service believed me to be in possession of this great secret, and in consequence my life was in danger. Such was the state of affairs. Already I had been within an ace of being hurled into eternity; what further dangers were in store for me it was impossible to tell.

When I arrived at my comfortable rooms in Half Moon Street I owned to a momentary sensation of relief, but this was of short duration. My fears with regard to the future quickly returned, and I determined to put the whole matter before my lawyer, Mr. Charles Tempest, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and take his advice.

I called on Tempest soon after breakfast; he was within and saw me almost immediately. I told him of the curious position in which I found myself, and I could see that at first he was almost unable to take my communication seriously. It was not until I had driven home fact after fact that he assumed his normal professional attitude.

"Now for your advice, sir," I said. "I do not know anyone in such a deplorable position as I find myself in. All the British Government and Scotland Yard combined cannot prevent my assassination by desperadoes. Is it likely that the persecution will be continued?"

"It is certainly possible," replied Tempest. "The attempt already made on your life is

sufficient to show you that these people are in earnest. Your position is, I take it, this. You are supposed by the agents of the French Secret Service to be in possession of a great secret, and nothing you can say will convince them to the contrary."

"That is so."

"In reality you have no secret whatever?"

"Precisely."

"It is the lady you call Mademoiselle Delacourt whom you principally fear?"

"Yes."

"You believe that she is one of the agents of the French Secret Service?"

"Yes."

"There is little doubt that you are in danger," continued Tempest. "The issues, you see, are considerable; they are international, and lives are cheap when these things hang in the balance. Well, you have two courses open to you. One, to take no notice at all and go on with your usual life—the other, to disappear. The first offers the greatest danger to yourself, and the second may seem a trifle cowardly, but in your position and circumstances I should quietly drop out of sight. Go to some remote part of Europe, amuse yourself with your favourite occupation, sketching, and wait there until the thing blows over."

"I do not like the idea," I answered. "I should be, to all intents and purposes, a sort of escaped criminal, except that in my case the situation would be reversed, for the criminals would be hunting down the innocent man. Thank you for your advice, Tempest, but at present I like neither alternative which you have suggested, and yet I have no third plan to propose for myself. Is it possible that the law can do nothing to help me?"

"Nothing: yours is probably a unique situation in the annals of circumstance."

I could not help sighing in self-pity.

"I am only five-and-twenty," I said, "and at any moment my life may be taken by some low brute."

"I pity you, my dear fellow, but what is to be done?"

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"I am like a man in a nightmare," I answered. "The whole thing is horrible."

"Take my advice, Phenays, and leave England. I can watch your case in this country, and will employ a good detective for the purpose. Now, think over what I have been saying and let me know when you have made your plans."

I left Tempest's office in profound depression. It was something, at any rate, to know the exact, crude, legal opinion of my position, which briefly amounted to this: I was liable at any moment to be assassinated.

Piccadilly and Pall Mall looked bright and cheerful as usual, but as I passed through the familiar crowd I shuddered more than once; my assassin might turn up at any corner, he might lay his hand on me at any moment, anywhere. The thought was enough to upset the stoutest nerves.

I entered my club, ordered lunch, and sat down to eat. I had barely begun when I heard a voice behind me exclaim—

"My dear Phenays!"

A hand was laid on my shoulder. I swung round. Before me stood my old friend Jack Tracey, whom I had not seen for nearly four years. He was a civil engineer, and had been abroad for some time, in Ceylon, laying some electric tramways.

"Just the very man I want," he cried. "I got home last week and found another billet waiting for me. This time it is in Portugal. I am looking out for a mate to come with me. I know that you are a lazy sort of dog, also that you have nothing special to do—will you come? Lovely climate beautiful scenery, and lots for you to paint; for my work will be in Cintra, about the most lovely spot in Europe—just the place for you to sketch in. The Portuguese Government are going to run a new road alongside one of the mountains, and

the work has been given to our firm, to the honour and glory of Cooper's Hill. Just lunching? I will join you; I am as ravenous as a hawk."

He took a seat at my table. His bronzed, honest face and breezy heartiness cheered me, and I was genuinely glad to see him again.

"When do you want to start?" I asked.

"The day after to-morrow. Is that too early for you? If you really make up your mind to come, I dare say I can put off for a day or two to suit you."

"Give me a little time to consider, my

"Before me stood
my old friend
Jack Tracey."



dear fellow. I never saw such a chap as you, always just the same, bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and impatience."

"I do not care what you call me, provided you come, Phenays. I want a mate, and you and I have always got on well together. Now, make up your mind and be sensible."

I finished my lunch without further remark; but while I ate, my thoughts were busy. Here, indeed, was a chance. Why should I not go? I should have just the companion I liked best, I should escape the east winds of the spring, and have a good excuse for that fitting which Tempest had advised me to undertake.

As we chatted and talked together, Tracey recounted all his experiences, and while I listened to him I made up my mind. Yes, I would leave England the day after tomorrow, and, taking the Royal Mail to Lisbon, escape from my persecutors—they surely would not follow me into Portugal. It had always been one of my greatest wishes to see Cintra, and here was the opportunity.

Two hours later I once more reached Tempest's office, and there told him that I had made my plans.

"The way of escape has come, and I have not sought for it," I remarked. "Such an opportunity ought not to be missed."

"It is the very thing," he replied, "and I am heartily glad, for your sake, Phenays. But now I will tell you what we had better do. It is most important that you and I should keep up a certain communication one with the other. I have already put a detective on your affairs. He is a capital fellow, and will watch things from this side of the water. By to-night's post I will send you a key of a private cipher, in which I can communicate with you if important news reaches me."

I agreed to this, and went back to my rooms to make necessary arrangements for my departure.

I had just settled down after dinner to write some letters when my servant entered.

"A lady to see you, sir," he said, handing me a card.

I started in surprise. What woman—unless, indeed, the terrible Mademoiselle Delacourt—took the slightest interest in me? I had neither mother nor sister, neither wife nor sweetheart. I glanced at the card which the man had given to me. The name I saw written upon it dispelled all thought of Mademoiselle. Miss Cecil Hamilton was a lady I had never heard of before.

"Show Miss Hamilton in," I said.

The next moment a slightly-built girl, with a dark face and beautiful eyes, entered the room. I rose and bowed; she bowed also to me. There was a deprecating, almost frightened look about her whole appearance which disarmed my anger.

"I am speaking to Mr. Phenays?" she said in a tentative voice.

"Yes," I answered. "Will you sit down?"

I pushed a chair towards her, but she did not take it. She continued to stand, laying one slender hand lightly on the back of the chair.

"I have much to apologise for," she said.

"My errand is distasteful and unpleasant. I am the bearer of a message from a lady, Mademoiselle Delacourt, whom you met in Paris."

"I do not wish to have any further communication with that lady," I interrupted, speaking hotly.

She held up her hand, as if to entreat my patience.

"I must deliver my message," she said. "I am Miss Delacourt's greatest friend. I am an English girl by birth, but have spent most of my life in Paris. In order to prove my identity, it will be sufficient for me to say that I am fully acquainted with your position as regards the secret entrusted to you by your late friend Mr. Escott, and which secret should have been given to Mademoiselle Delacourt."

Here she stopped speaking and looked earnestly at me. Her eyes were kindly and compassionate. Her lips slightly trembled.

"I am sorry for you," she said. "You are so young, and unless you accede to my request your fate is so terrible."

"I can do without your pity, Miss Hamilton," I answered. "Please tell me at once why Mademoiselle has presumed to send you to visit me."

"Because she also is sorry for you, Mr. Phenays. Because it has occurred to us both that, although you have already refused to put yourself into a position of safety, yet on mature consideration you will be willing to discharge your duty to your friend's memory and so act as a man of honour."

It was with difficulty I could restrain a burst of indignation.

"Mademoiselle wishes you to communicate your secret to me. Will you do so?"

"I will not," I replied. "Forgive me if I speak frankly, but you have intruded on me in what I consider an unwarrantable manner, and this is no moment for courtesy. Tell Mademoiselle that I possess no secret, and am therefore incapable of communicating what I do not know. Tell her also that I could, if necessary, throw light on a recent occurrence, in the neighbourhood of Paris, which would be by no means to her credit. Tell her, further, that at any instant I could put her within the arm of the law. And finally tell her that there is a law in England, if not in France, by which redress can be claimed for personal annoyance."

At these words, to my amazement and distress, the girl fell on her knees.

"It is for your sake, believe me, it is for your sake," she pleaded. "I can understand

your indignation, and forgive it. Please reconsider things. You will regret this—oh, terribly—if you do not. Please change your mind. Do you think I like forcing myself upon you? I beg of you to tell me your secret, because I have your true interest at heart."

"It is unpleasant to be rude to a lady," I replied, "but I must ask you, Miss Hamilton, to leave me. I have one answer to give to Mademoiselle, and that is, an emphatic 'No.' I have no secret; and if I had, she is the last person on earth to whom I would tell it."

As I spoke I rang the bell. My servant entered.

"Show this lady downstairs," I said.

She left me without a word. After she had gone I sent a line to Tempest to acquaint him with my interview. I received the following reply—

"Do nothing but get away," were his brief and emphatic words.

All the next day I was busy packing and settling my affairs, and the following morning, at eight o'clock, Tracey and I, with my large Newfoundland dog Zulu, had left Charing Cross *en route* for Portugal. It was only at the last moment that I decided to take Zulu with me. He was a splendid animal, and had been my constant companion since his puppyhood. Our journey to Cintra took place without any adventure, and when we had put up at Lawrence's comfortable hotel I congratulated myself on having left England and France so far behind. I surely must be safe in this remote corner of the world. It was therefore with an elation of heart that I received my first impressions of the charming spot where Tracey's work lay.

The little village was situated close to the base of a range of granite mountains, the extreme continuation of the Estrella. The mountains were clothed with verdure and trees of every variety and size. Towering above us, on twin peaks, stood an old ruined Moorish castle and the new royal castle of the Pena.

We arrived at Cintra about midday, and immediately after lunch we started out to climb to the Moorish castle in company with the Portuguese overseer, who was anxious to show Tracey the site of the projected new road. While they were talking business I had time to take in the romantic loveliness and exquisite richness of the colouring around me. The trees were just budding, birds were singing, and the air was full of the sweet scent of heliotrope that hung in clusters on the walls of the *quintas* as we climbed

past them. I felt light-hearted as I had not been since my terrible adventure in Paris. I saw before me months of undisturbed enjoyment, painting among these enchanting hills and dales, for surely the most inveterate enemy would scarcely follow an inoffensive and innocent man to this remote part of Portugal.

I recall my sensations on this first day very vividly, because of the darker recollections which were so soon to follow.

The next morning Tracey and I started off again to the site of his work. Already some Portuguese labourers were busy clearing timber and blasting rocks. The latter operation interested me considerably. A deep hole was drilled into the centre of a boulder, into this a handful of dynamite was poured—then a little moss was pushed on the top, and the fuse inserted. After it was lit we scrambled away to a safe spot. In a couple of minutes a terrific roar rent the air, and the great granite boulder lay split into half a dozen fragments.

I had spent over a week at Lawrence's Hotel, and a picture which I was painting was in full progress, my life was happy, my days fully occupied, when one evening, at a single blow, all sense of security was shattered.

Tracey and I were returning home, when we saw standing on the balcony of the little hotel the slight and graceful figure of Miss Hamilton.

"Good Heavens!" I could not help exclaiming; the blood rushed back to my heart and I felt my face turning cold.

My violent start and words of consternation caused Tracey to turn and glance at me in astonishment.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Do you see that lady standing there?"

"I see a remarkably pretty girl. Is she an old flame, Phenays? In the name of Fortune, what is the matter with you?"

"I saw her once before," I gasped. "I hoped never to meet her again. What has she come for?"

"How can I tell you? I presume visitors are allowed to stay at the hotel without our being consulted."

"If you knew all——" I began.

But I had scarcely spoken the words before Miss Hamilton, having seen us both, waved her hand to me with a gesture of recognition, and the next instant was tripping down the steps of the hotel to meet us.

"Mr. Phenays," she exclaimed, "by what good fortune do we meet? How do you do? Pray introduce me to your friend."



"The next moment she had dropped on her knees by the dog."

Her manner was so frank and pleasant, the expression in her eyes so joyous and unshaded by embarrassment, that in spite of myself I began to think it a hideous dream that this pretty girl had ever come to me to plead for Mademoiselle Delacourt. I replied to her stiffly, however, and when she glanced in Tracey's direction gave the necessary introduction with marked unwillingness.

"Oh, what a lovely dog!" she said as Zulu came up.

The next moment she had dropped on her knees by the dog, clasped her arms round his neck, and printed a kiss on his broad forehead. To these blandishments Zulu immediately succumbed, although, as a rule, he was extremely distant to strangers; he licked Miss Hamilton's hand, wagged his bushy tail, and when she slowly returned to the hotel, to my still greater amazement, he left us to follow her.

"Your friend, or your enemy, or whatever you like to call her, seems to have considerable power over the dog world," said Tracey.

"But what is up, Phenays? You look as if you had got a shock."

"So I have; and perhaps I'll tell you to-morrow, perhaps I'll keep it to myself. God help me! I do not know what to do."

"Your nerves are unstrung; you had better have some dinner and forget your trepidations," said Tracey, with a dash of impatience.

There was nothing for it but to follow his advice. At *table d'hôte* Miss Hamilton dined with us. She said quite frankly that she had a passion for travelling, had come by sea to Lisbon, and was making a brief tour through Portugal *en route* for Spain.

"I shall stay here for two or three days," she remarked. "Cintra is the most lovely spot I have ever seen in my life."

Tracey was evidently much taken with her; he was quite enthusiastic when he and I paced up and down the terrace for our evening smoke. He now asked me in wonder what I knew about her.

"She visited me in London," I answered. "The purport of her visit I prefer not to talk about."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Keep your secret, Phenays," he remarked. "Whatever you may know about her, I protest that Miss Hamilton is as charming a girl as I have often seen. I have promised her that she shall accompany us to-morrow to see some of the blasting operations; she is much interested in them."

Early the following morning I arose, and seeing Miss Hamilton up and walking in the direction of the shore, I resolved to follow her. Zulu, of course, accompanied me.

"Miss Hamilton," I cried as I drew near. She stopped, turned, and looked me full in the face.

"How do you do, Mr. Phenays?" she remarked. "Oh, this lovely dog!"

Again all her attention was absorbed by the Newfoundland, who pressed close to her, wagged his tail, and licked her small hand.

"I want to ask you a direct question," was my next remark. "Why have you followed me here?"

"Our meeting at Lawrence's Hotel is a coincidence," she said. "Make what you like of it."

"Then you have not followed me?"

She glanced at me for a moment.

"No," she said.

"I do not believe you," I replied. "You are telling me a lie."

When I said this the colour swept into her face. She had been looking at me, now she turned away. The action was significant. I was certain now of what I was almost sure of before. She had come to Cintra because I was there, for what ghastly purpose Heaven only knew.

I would have questioned her further, but just then Tracey made his appearance. He was evidently more than attracted by Miss Hamilton. Her gentle words, her pretty, well-trained voice, her graceful actions, impressed this rough, good-hearted fellow in a way which amazed me.

"What are our plans for to-day?" he asked in a genial voice. "I, of course, shall be busy with my work, but if you would really like to see the blasting, Miss Hamilton, I will promise to look after you. You, Phenays, and I can lunch together just on the spot where Phenays is painting his celebrated picture."

"Oh, you are an artist, Mr. Phenays?" she asked, and she gave me a gentle and what looked like a beseeching glance. "Your plan is delightful, Mr. Tracey," she continued; "let us carry it out to the letter."

Tracey grew now almost boisterous. We interviewed our landlady, with the result that we were provided with an excellent luncheon-basket, and immediately after breakfast we started for our day's expedition.

I went to my accustomed place, sat down and made arrangements to continue my painting. I gazed right across the valley at the glorious scene which I was endeavouring to depict; my palette was in my hand, my brushes lay near. All of a sudden I missed the dog. Where was he? It was the habit of this faithful creature to lie at my feet during the long hours that I was employed over my work, and never for an instant to leave me. His absence puzzled me, until I remembered his extraordinary penchant for Miss Hamilton. Could it be possible that he was with her? At lunch time this turned out to be the case, for Miss Hamilton, Tracey, and the dog appeared together.

"Ah, Zulu," I cried, pretending to be angry with the handsome creature, "you have forsaken me for the first time in your life."

As I said the words I noticed a peculiar flash of satisfaction in Miss Hamilton's eyes. She was in high spirits and insisted on opening the luncheon-basket and acting as hostess. We two young men were as children in her hands. She was so gentle, bright, picturesque, and graceful that even I forgot my alarms and enjoyed myself thoroughly. After lunch Tracey rose.

"It is hard to tear myself away, but Duty calls," he exclaimed. "Are you coming back," he added, looking at Miss Hamilton, "or will you watch Phenays for a time?"

"I will follow you presently with Zulu," she answered, "but just now I should like to watch Mr. Phenays."

Tracey went off, and Miss Hamilton and I were alone. The dog lay at her feet. Now and then her pretty hand touched his black head, now and then she looked at me without speaking—her attitude was one of repose and contentment.

"How well you paint!" she said suddenly.

"This is the hobby of my life," I answered. "I should, indeed, think small beer of myself if I did not do it fairly well."

"You are, perhaps, a professional artist, Mr. Phenays?"

"No," I replied, "I am an amateur. I have never earned my bread—I have enough money to live on."

"Ah, lucky you!" she replied.

"I do not agree with you," I answered shortly. "The man who has enough money to live on is deprived of the most powerful stimulus which can animate the human race. He need not work to live, therefore he scarcely works at all. But there," I added, reading a curious expression in her eyes, "I have done for to-day."

I put down my palette, collected my brushes, and, putting them back in their case, looked full at her.

"When are you going away?" I asked.

"Do not you like to have me here?"

"Frankly, no."

"That means that you are afraid of me."

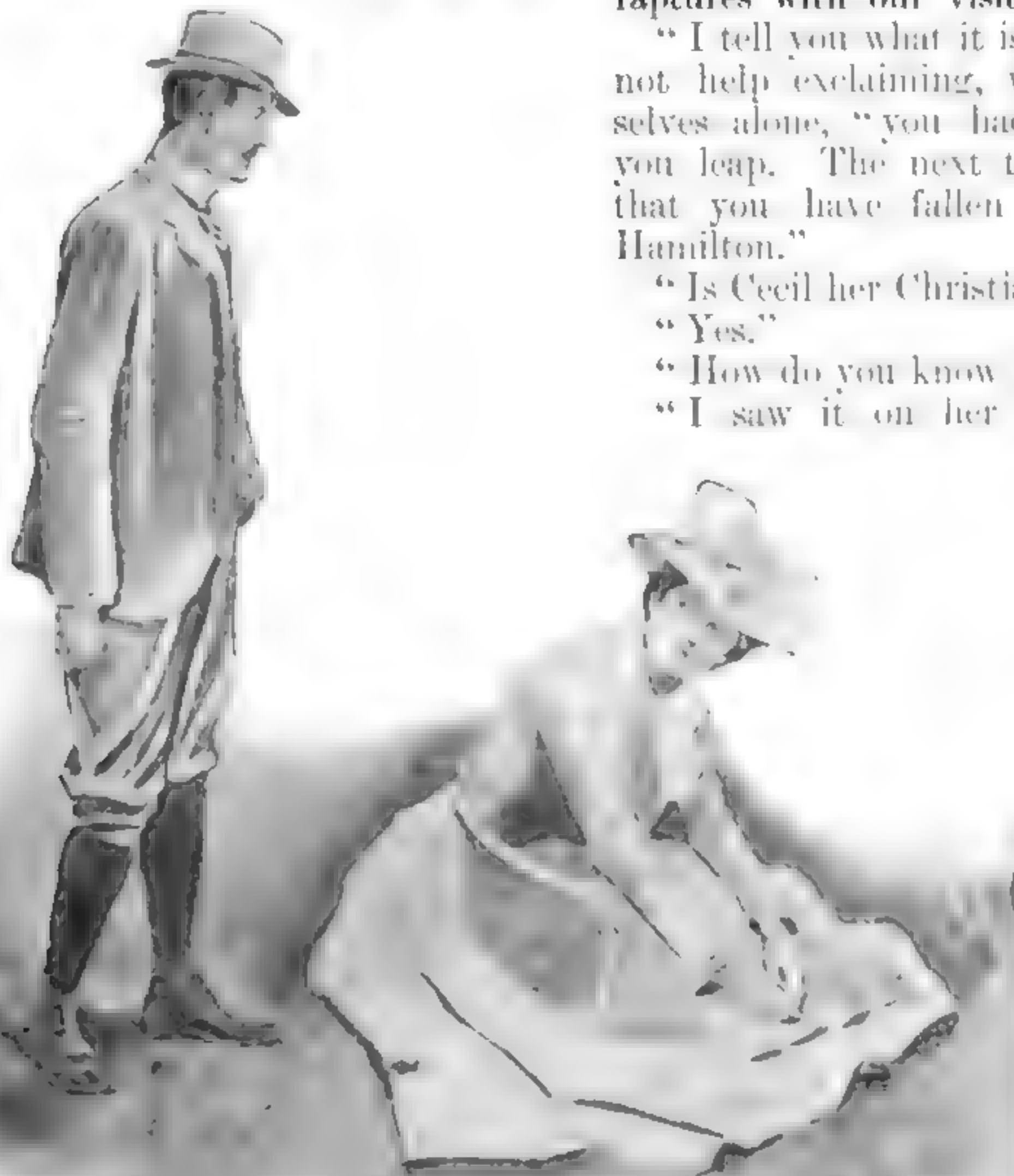
I was silent.

"Mr. Phenays," she said gently, "I did not mean to say a word, but your question and your attitude towards me force me to speak. You dislike my presence at Cintra, you resent it. Cintra is your *hiding-place*, and I have come to it."

I shook my head when she said that Cintra

was my hiding-place. She gazed back at me and laughed, then she said abruptly—

“You need not deny it. You say that I have followed you here, I say that you have come here to hide ; that means that you are afraid. Now, Mr. Phenays, I am sorry for you. It is a pity that one so young and good-looking, and with enough money to live on, should needlessly endanger his life—yes, I repeat the word, his life. I will go to-



“‘You think me a coward,’ I said.

morrow morning if you will confide to me that small secret which you refused to communicate to Mademoiselle Delacourt.”

I rose now and bent over Miss Hamilton, who was still seated on the ground.

“You think me a coward,” I said, “but I am not quite so bad as that. Listen. The subject to which you have alluded must be in the future a closed book between us. I decline to discuss it—you are not to allude to it. Now, what do you think of this view? Come and stand just here and see what I am making of it.”

She rose and entered into a critical and

very intelligent dissertation with regard to my picture. Soon afterwards we both wended our way in the direction where Tracey was busy superintending the making of the new road.

Notwithstanding my growing anxiety, the evening passed cheerfully. Miss Hamilton had brought her guitar, and she sang Spanish ditties, to her own accompaniment, with excellent taste. Tracey was in greater raptures with our visitor than ever.

“I tell you what it is, old fellow,” I could not help exclaiming, when we found ourselves alone, “you had better look before you leap. The next thing I shall hear is that you have fallen in love with Cecil Hamilton.”

“Is Cecil her Christian name?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw it on her card.”

“In this hotel?”

“No, before I came to Portugal.”

“Phenays, won’t you explain this mystery?”

“I hope I may never need to,” was my answer.

“But, Tracey, one word of warning. Whoever you lose your heart to, do not let Cecil Hamilton be the girl.”

He laughed, then he sighed.

“I never intend to marry ; I would not tie myself to a woman for all creation, but I may as well own that if I could see myself

conducted to the altar for the sake of any woman, it would be for that of the pretty girl who is now at the hotel.”

A few days went by, and my sketch progressed. Miss Hamilton did not leave Cintra, and Zulu became more and more attached to her. We two young men and this dark-eyed, pretty girl now spent the greater part of our days together ; in the evening she sang to us. Tracey was like a moth coming ever nearer and nearer to the candle. Beyond these small facts nothing happened in the least interesting.

Another week went by, and a morning

dawned with bright sunshine and cloudless sky. I had got up rather earlier than usual, intending to continue my picture before the sun got too hot, when the waiter entered the dining-saloon and handed me a telegram. I tore it open, my heart quickened with a sense of alarm. It was in cipher and was signed "Tempest." I quickly took out my copy of the key and translated the words, which ran as follows:—

"You are in the utmost danger. Enemy has been close to you since you left England.—Tempest."

I sank into a chair and grasped the paper in my hand. It did not need Tempest's words to tell me where the danger lay. Even a pretty girl, if employed by your enemies, can be ruthless and desperate. I felt a sick sensation round my heart. The inability to know from what direction the blow would fall was the worst of my trial. Till now I had refrained from telling Tracey a word of my extraordinary position, but on receipt of the telegram I determined to take him into my confidence. Perhaps he might help me. I sought his room and found him dressing. As piece by piece I communicated all the facts of my strange story, I observed a succession of changes passing over his face. First of all surprise, then incredulity, and last, as I showed him the telegram, a grave expression.

"What am I to do?" I cried. "This is fact, remember."

"So it appears," he answered. "You are a nice sort of companion to go about with." Here he laid his hand on my shoulder. "Never mind, old man," he continued, "I will stick to you through thick and thin; but do for Heaven's sake get the idea, that poor little Cecil Hamilton is mixed up in this affair, out of your head."

"By her own showing she is in communication with Miss Delacourt," I answered.

"That may be; but for any vulgar violence, any danger to your life, she would be the last person employed. If I were you, I would try to keep up my pecker, Phenays. We are not in fairyland or the realm of impossibilities; you cannot do any more than you are doing. Take my revolver with you this morning. I shall stay pretty near; and if there is the slightest sign of tricks, we will make it warm for the individual, whoever he may happen to be. Wait till I have had breakfast, and we will go up the mountain as usual. Of course, go on with your picture, it will help to take your mind off this nasty affair; and you have got Zulu, a bodyguard

in himself. If it is any sort of vulgar violence, he will account for somebody."

After thinking for a moment or two I resolved to take Tracey's advice. There was, as he said, no help for the present situation, and to sit still with my hands before me meant madness.

Just as he and I were starting for the mountain, Miss Hamilton came into the hall to meet us. She was fully dressed, as if for a journey, and at that moment I saw the hall-porter conveying her luggage downstairs.

"What!" I exclaimed, "are you off?"

"Yes," she answered. "I go to Lisbon by the next train. I have had a sudden message which obliges me to get to Paris as soon as possible."

Here she gave me a full and very penetrating stare.

"Then we shall not meet again?" I said.

There was unmistakable relief in my tones.

"We are not likely to meet any more," she answered gravely, almost solemnly. She held out her hand. I just touched it; as I did so I felt an extraordinary repugnance seizing me.

"I shall miss you both," she said, "and in especial shall I miss Zulu; but good-bye, don't let me keep you. *Au revoir*, gentlemen."

She waved her hand in the pretty way she had done when I had first seen her standing on the balcony, and the next instant Tracey, Zulu, and I started for our day's expedition.

"Well, that is a relief!" I could not help muttering.

Tracey shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish you would leave that unfortunate girl out of the thing," he said. "She is not what you think her, of that I am firmly convinced."

I did not reply. We went up the mountain by our usual path, and I soon settled myself in my accustomed nook to continue my sketch.

"There you are, old chap," said Tracey. "Paint away, and good luck to you! I shall be just above you, a hundred yards or so, and I will come down to have a smoke and a chat now and then. I do not wonder you feel capsized, but there is really no possible danger."

He started up the path and disappeared into a thicket of high laurels. I felt little inclined to work, and for half an hour scarcely touched my canvas; but by and by I became once more interested and then completely absorbed. Presently I rose from my stool



"With one frantic leap I cleared the wall."

and took a step back to view the picture, and then glanced up at the scenery. All Nature seemed to be dozing in the bright midday sunshine. The still air was laden with the perfume of thousands of flowers; a bright yellow butterfly, the first I had seen, passed close to me. Just at that moment I glanced around and perceived for the first time that Zulu was missing. I slightly wondered at his absence. Miss Hamilton was no longer in the neighbourhood to attract him. I resolved to give him a scolding when he reappeared, and then sat down to my work. I was busy just then trying exactly to fix the depth of the purple haze that hung on the distant mountains. I had just dipped my brush into my water-can, when I suddenly heard my name shouted from above in Tracey's deep tones. The voice came booming down over the rocks, and extreme excitement rang in the sharp-flung words.

"Phenays, run, quick! for God's sake get away from the dog!"

I started up, overturning my easel as I did so.

"What is it?" I shouted back, as a chill fear of a danger I could not see shook me.

But I had scarcely uttered the words when, turning swiftly, I saw Zulu coming along the path at an even canter towards me. What on earth was the matter with him? There was something queer on his back that bulged up above his great head. Good God, it was something smoking! What, I could not see—but it was enough. I knew what had happened. Miss Hamilton's interest in the blasting operations was explained. Miss Hamilton's visit to Cintra was made plain; the reason of her remarkable friendship for Zulu was all too manifest—the dog was to be the weapon used for my destruction. It was a fuse that towered above his big head. Any moment the fuse would reach the dynamite below and a terrific explosion would scatter his life and mine. The very imminence of the peril cooled my blood. I crouched down on the ground and, as Zulu approached, made an effort to snatch the fuse from his head. In vain—he would not come near. He was excited and half mad with spirits. The poor brute gambolled round me, little knowing that there was but a step between him and a horrible death. Suddenly he made for me, as though to caress me, and I, possessed by an impulse which I could not restrain, nor fathom, nor overcome, fled from him. I fled down the mountain side like one possessed. Even in that mad flight my reason told me I had little chance of escape. The faster I

went, the quicker did the dog pursue me; I could hear his hurried breath as he rushed after me. In less than a minute I had reached the top of a stony and steep descent to the little church of Santa Maria. On one side of the path was a stone wall, on the other a sheer drop of sixty feet. Scarcely knowing what I did, with one frantic leap I cleared the wall. I had hardly done so before an appalling explosion rent the air; the very earth seemed to shake; a huge fragment of stonework flew whistling by, and then the roar died away in echoes reverberating along the mountain side. Trembling and half stunned, I looked back over the wall. Not a vestige of the dog was to be seen, nothing but a huge ragged hole where the macadam had been torn up. I sank down sick and giddy. After a time I vaguely wondered why Tracey did not appear. It was nearly an hour before he came running down the path. When we met he grasped my hand; his ruddy face was white and he was panting heavily.

"By Jove! old man, that was a near thing!" he gasped.

"But how did it happen? Tell me, how was it done? What did you see?" I asked.

My teeth were chattering even in the hot sunshine. I looked at Tracey, who stood quiet now by my side.

"Why do you not speak?" I asked.

"What do you want to know?" he replied. "The dog is dead, poor brute, and you have escaped by the skin of your teeth."

"But how did it happen? Tell me what you know."

"I will," he said then. "I was standing close up alongside that tower under the pines, when I saw Zulu come round the corner just where the wall is low. He passed within two feet of me, wagging his tail. I spoke to him; he looked round, but did not stop. Suddenly, to my amazement, I saw that he had something fastened to his collar, something from which a little smoke was rising. The next instant I perceived that it was a fuse exactly like those my men use for blasting. Then the horror of the thing struck me. I remembered your telegram and I knew what it meant. I grabbed at the dog to tear it off, but he slipped by, making down to you, as was natural. Then I shouted, for I saw your danger. Thank God! you just escaped; but it was a near thing, a matter of seconds."

As he said the last words I saw that he was trembling horribly; something in his attitude and manner aroused my suspicions.

"The explosion took place nearly an hour ago," I said. "Why did you not come to me sooner? You are concealing something—what is the matter?"

He did not speak.

"You are concealing something?"

"Yes, oh, my God! yes."

"What, Tracey? Speak, in Heaven's name! It was not that girl—tell me—Miss Hamilton had nothing to do with it?"

"Yes," said Tracey again—"yes."

He spoke in gasps, as though his breath failed him.

"I will tell you," he said. "You must know, and the sooner it is over the better. When the dog rushed to you I saw a girl crouching behind a boulder of rock. She was Miss Hamilton. She was straining her neck and bending forward to watch the movement of the dog. She never saw me. When the report came she clapped her hands to her ears, looked again as though her eyes would start from her head, uttered a shriek, and flew down the mountain in the opposite direction. I followed her like a madman. I called to her to stop. A sort of instinct told me what she was going to do. I knew that she was making for the cliff, just where

there is a drop of five hundred feet. She had an advantage of me and she ran like the wind. She got to the edge of the cliff while I was still a good way behind her. How she stopped herself I do not know, but she did. She stood as rigid as a statue, pressed her hand to her heart, turned and shouted to me—

"'Your friend is alive,' were her words. 'I have failed. Those who belong to the French Secret Service *die* when they fail —'

"With that she was over the precipice. Phenays, old man—I—am—sick."

The great burly fellow fell like a lump of lead at my feet.

Tracey came to himself, and I brought him back to the hotel, and that evening I went with some workmen to discover the body of the miserable girl whose mission it had been to take my life. I found it mangled out of recognition. The next day we buried her on the side of the mountain. That evening Tracey spoke to me—

"I cannot stay here, Phenays; it is no use. I have wired to Cooper's Hill. They must send out another man to complete this job; I leave C'intra to-morrow morning."

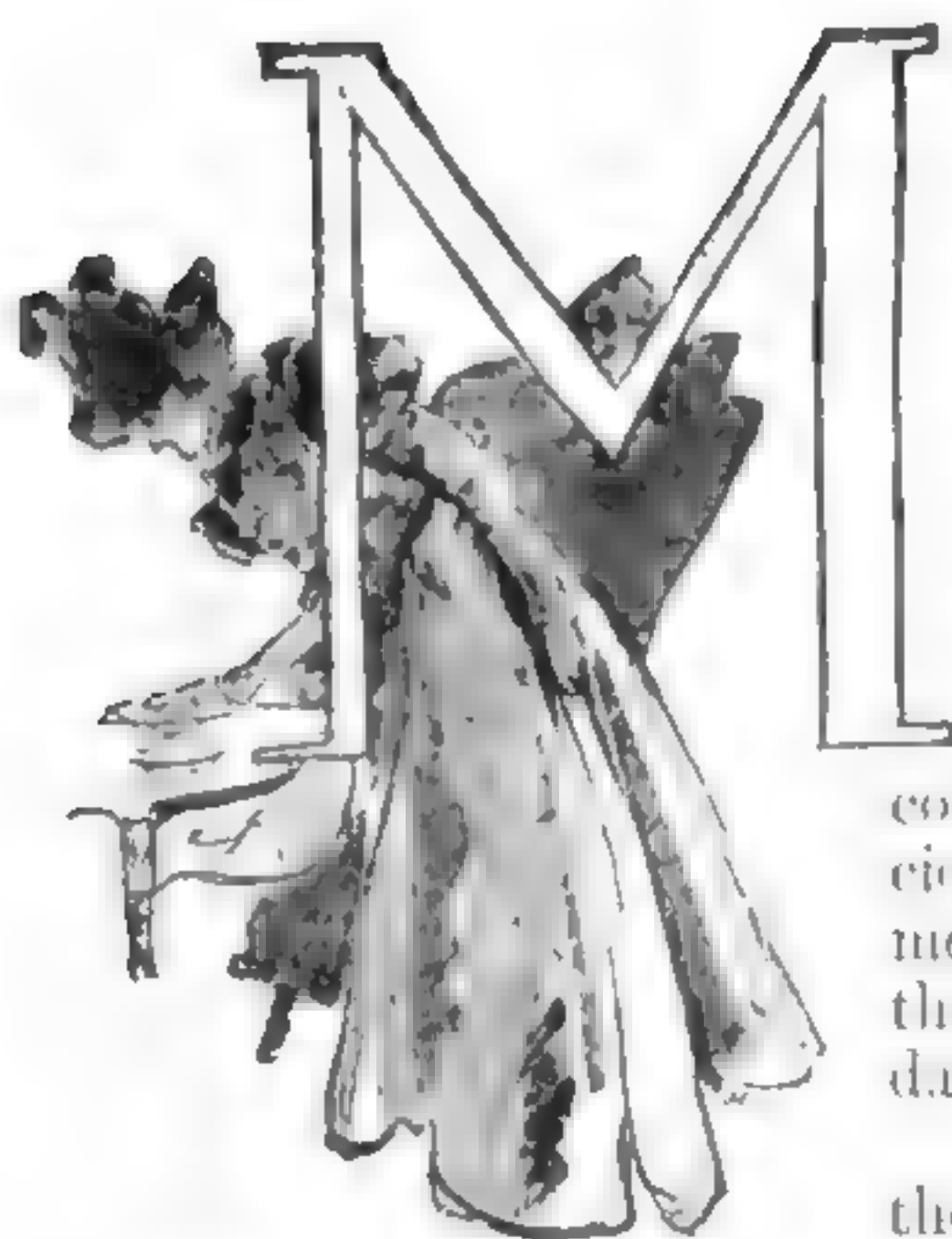
"And I go with you," was my answer.



THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.*

No. III.—THE TIGER'S CLAW.



MADemoiselle DELACOURT had now twice attempted my life. From the manner, the words and actions of the unfortunate girl who had

committed suicide in the moment of failure, this was abundantly evident.

"I shall put the matter into the hands of the

authorities," I said to myself, and when my friend Jack hurried to England, I remained behind at Lisbon.

On the afternoon of the day of my arrival I called upon the British Consul.

He received me courteously, and I need scarcely describe his amazement when I explained my position.

"I am a witness to all that occurred," I said to him, "and my friend Tracey is prepared to return to Portugal at any time to bear me out. I trust, sir," I added, "that you will give me your advice and assistance, for truly I am in a position of grave danger."

"There is no doubt whatever with regard to that," was his reply. "I had a letter this morning from M. Ayres, the French Consul, informing me that Mademoiselle Delacourt was here."

"Here!" I cried, starting to my feet, and a cold sensation running through my frame.

"Yes, here, Mr. Phenays; she is staying with the Duchess of Almeida now. That terrible woman has friends everywhere in the highest positions, and I may as well tell you, you would find it extremely difficult to

substantiate the charge of conspiracy against a lady in her position. Her influence, too, is very great; and though the authorities are civility itself to the English, you know, my dear sir, they are very slow, phenomenally slow. Position and Court influence can do anything here when backed by money. Mademoiselle Delacourt is known; you are unknown. I think it is most unwise of you to have come to Portugal."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, in the first instance, there is no capital punishment here, and in the next, money will do practically everything. You are, believe me, far safer on English soil. This is a very serious matter, and I am sorry for you."

"But can you help me?" I asked with some impatience.

He paused, silent for a moment, evidently thinking deeply.

"I can do nothing," he said then. "It is out of my power to work in the dark, and against such a foe as Mademoiselle Delacourt. But there is one man who might render you assistance. He is a Portuguese, and a personal friend of mine, and he is engaged by the Government in many secret international inquiries. You may trust him absolutely. He is a very smart man, and speaks almost every European language. In short, you will find him an excellent fellow. This is his name and address. I should go and see him at once."

I took the slip of paper he gave me. On it was written—

JOSÉ DA FONDECA PINHEIRO,
Avenida da Liberdade, 32A.

Thanking the British Consul, I went at once to the address.

I found myself standing before one of the finest houses in the beautiful Avenue. It was set back from the road and surrounded by a garden, in which many magnificent palms were growing. A liveried servant answered my ring and ushered me into the presence of his master. The Portuguese are noted for their excellent dress, but I had

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rarely seen anyone so perfectly attired. Senhor Pinheiro was refinement personified, from his white, almond-shaped nails and jewelled fingers, to his pointed and polished boots.

On explaining who I was, he handed me a chair and seated himself at a desk, upon which lay a heap of official-looking papers and a large revolver. As he laid his left hand on the table, I noticed with astonishment that two of the fingers were wanting.

"I was almost expecting you, Mr. Phenays," he said, speaking in perfect English and stroking his black, pointed beard. "She is a clever woman, isn't she?"

"Whom do you mean?" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"I mean Mademoiselle Delacourt, of course," he replied. "I know something of your case, sir."

"What! you know Mademoiselle Delacourt?"

"I know her well. I have met her in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and I was dining with her at the Duchess of Almeida's last night."

"And you know about my special case?"

"I know of the attempt made on your life a few days ago at Cintra. I was at Government House when the police telegraphed the news. There will be an inquiry, of course; but, apart from that, I can astonish you by telling you that I knew of your escape from the Chateau Laroque. The affair was communicated to all the European detective agencies."

"You astound me!" I cried, but at the same time a pleasant feeling of security stole over me. I felt that here, indeed, I had a good friend.

"Of course you are mad to have left England," continued Pinheiro. "But do you know, Mr. Phenays, I am glad that you have come."

He spoke in a curious tone and looked me full in the face.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he said, bending towards me, and with the fist of his crippled hand tightly clenched, "because it is the one desire of my life to see that woman in chains."

The sudden transformation in the man's face was extraordinary—all the passion of his hot Latin blood, which only boils at some personal wrong, showed now in his voice, his eyes, and his features.

"Nothing," he continued, "would give me greater pleasure than to see Mademoiselle Delacourt exposed in her true character,

than to see her driven in disgrace from the European Courts. But if that is effected it means also her imprisonment. I can't help admiring her sometimes," he continued, a grim smile playing round his lips. "She is, I think, mad; no one who was not mad could be so devilish clever."

"You have some personal animosity against her, I presume?" I continued.

He held up his crippled hand.

"I owe that to her," he said in a low voice. "Some day I will tell you how it happened."

"Well," I said, "what can you do for me? I can bring valuable witness to testify to the truth of my story. The suicide of Miss Hamilton is a fact well authenticated at Cintra. How can you protect me in future? I am young, innocent, I love life, and I don't want to fall a victim to the knife of the assassin."

"You are right," he replied.

As he spoke he rose and drew himself up to his full height.

"Mr. Phenays," he said, "this arrival of yours means a complete change in my own life. You are in difficulty, and, I will not deny it, in extreme danger. Now, you will not object to my joining you in this matter; it will cost nothing, and you will have the advantage of my experience and knowledge in the hunting down of this woman. You, the hunted, shall turn hunter, and we will rid Europe of a pestilential and powerful malefactor."

I grasped his hand.

"You mean this, Senhor Pinheiro?" I asked.

"I was never more serious in my life; the whole of my energies shall be directed to this object. Mademoiselle, I know, has gone from Lisbon; therefore, for the time you are perfectly safe—in fact, you are safer here than anywhere else. Stay on for the present and enjoy yourself, while I mature my scheme."

"With delight," I murmured, and a vast burden seemed lifted from my mind at the thought of having this shrewd and clever man to work with me, to protect me from dangers that I should never see, and, still more, to help me to deliver Mademoiselle Delacourt into the hands of justice. It seemed almost too good to be believed.

"Well," he said, "having made our decision, we will enjoy ourselves until the time for action arrives. You shall see all that Lisbon has to show to the stranger, and you will meet all the people worth meeting. To-morrow we will combine business with

pleasure, and I will take you to call upon the Duchess of Almeida at her castle at Estoril, a lovely spot at the mouth of the river on the seashore. I am dining out to-night, or I would ask you to come here. Where are you staying?"

"At Durand's Hotel," I said.

"Very good. I will expect you at eleven to-morrow morning, and I will drive you over to the Castle to breakfast."

It was many days since I had enjoyed a meal as I did my solitary dinner that night at my hotel. A great light had broken; I had found a friend of evident ability, a man in touch with all the European police, *au courant* with diplomatic affairs, and moving

was standing on the steps of his handsome house, evidently waiting for me.

"Just ready," he said gaily. "Come along, the dog-cart is coming round. By the way," he added, as we got in and he took the reins and drove off at a spanking pace, "the Duchess does not speak English, and as you do not know Portuguese well, you had better talk to her in French."

"I can do that," I answered.

We were now going down the Rua Auguste, and out by the Boa Vista embankment. Our way lay along the Tagus, which was covered with numerous craft and abounding with life and animation. Picturesque mountains lined the opposite banks. In less than an hour we



"I owe that to her," he said."

in the best Portuguese society. There had been no acting in his sudden outburst of passionate hatred against Mademoiselle Delacourt. I felt sure that if ever a time came when he was in a position to pay off his debt to her, she would receive little mercy. No race can be kinder, more sympathetic and gentle, than the Portuguese, but none can be more devilishly cruel and vindictive when they avenge a personal wrong. Mademoiselle would soon see that Senhor Pinheiro was working on my side, and this fact would in itself prevent molestation.

I went round early the next morning to Senhor Pinheiro's house, for I was impatient to see him again and assure myself of the fact that he was altogether on my side. He

reached Almeida Castle, a grand old building still retaining its Moorish architecture. The Castle was surrounded in front by magnificent gardens of palms and pines, while the back of the building ran down on to the sand by the seashore, in which the buttresses were deeply embedded. As we drove out, Senhor Pinheiro gave me a short account of the old place. The Castle had been a Moorish fortress until 1147, when Alfonso Henriques, the first King of Portugal, assisted by other Crusaders bound for Palestine, surrounded Lisbon, then in the hands of the Moors, and after five months' hard fighting he entered the city in triumph. After this, the house was given by him to his valiant lieutenant, the first Duke of Almeida, in whose family

it has remained ever since. Pinheiro informed me that the house was full of treasures presented to the family by the celebrated Vasco da Gama, on his return from India in 1499.

"Remember," he said, as we stopped at the house, "I am introducing you as a friend of Mademoiselle Delacourt's——"

"But why?" I interrupted, in great surprise.

"Because," he answered, "in no other way can you get information about her. She is, as I have already said, one of the cleverest women in Europe. My friends here also believe her to be an impersonification of all the virtues, and if they think that you are a friend of hers they can talk freely."

We were shown into a magnificent *sala*, overlooking the sunlit sea, where we were received by the Duchess and her daughter, the Marqueza Ferraz. Both ladies welcomed Pinheiro with effusion, and me with kindly warmth.

Portuguese girls are, as a rule, not good-looking; but the young Marqueza was an exception of the most striking kind. She was tall and slender, with the extreme bloom of youth on her softly rounded cheeks, with dark, lustrous eyes and grace in her every movement. But the extraordinary thing about her was this—she had a remarkable likeness to Mademoiselle Delacourt. So striking was this likeness that I caught myself looking at her again and again. A sensation almost of repulsion came over me as I did so, although the likeness between the Marqueza and Mademoiselle Delacourt only applied to features, and not at all to expression; for the young girl had a frank and lovely face, full of kindness and good nature.

While Senhor Pinheiro talked to the Duchess, the Marqueza came and took a seat near to me.

"So you know Mademoiselle Delacourt, Monsieur Phenays?" she said, speaking with



"There is an old legend attached to this head-dress."

a most charming French accent, and using that tongue. Mademoiselle is one of my greatest friends. Mother and I have often stayed with her in Paris. Certainly she is one of the cleverest women I have ever met. Did you happen to see her on her flying visit to Lisbon?"

"No," I answered. "Was her visit a very short one?"

"Of course it was," answered the Marqueza; "that gay Mademoiselle never stays long in one place. She thinks nothing of visiting half the European capitals in less than three weeks."

"On pleasure or business?" I asked.

"Pleasure, of course; just to visit her numerous friends. But she certainly always *talks* about business. Mother and I quite laugh at her about it. Such a speech is so like a Parisian. Why, one of those dear creatures will go half over Europe to buy a new tea-gown. But how do you like the Portuguese, Monsieur Phenays?"

Senhor Pinheiro tells me this is your first visit."

"Yes, my first," I answered. "I do not know Lisbon well, but Cintra is very beautiful." As I mentioned the latter place I could not help giving an involuntary shudder.

"Oh, yes, beautiful; but so dull, no one ever goes there now. By the way, are you interested in old curios? We have a wonderful collection from India. Shall I show them to you before we go to breakfast?"

"I should like nothing better," I replied.

"Then we will leave mother and Senhor Pinheiro to discuss the latest Lisbon scandals. The Senhor knows everyone and everything, and is so awfully clever. Between ourselves, I am a little afraid of him."

The true charm of Portuguese society lies in the power the host has to make his visitors at home. In a few minutes the Marqueza was showing me over the beautiful house and chatting about the treasures, her face full of animation and her eyes bright. Presently we entered the drawing-room, where the Vasco da Gama curios were kept. They were of great rarity and value—carved ivories, elephant goads, rare gold ornaments set with jewels, and magnificent jade bowls. One piece in especial attracted my attention. It was a Hindoo head-dress of great magnificence. It was chiefly made of finely woven silks of various shades, the colour strengthened by plaits of gold thread, and surmounted by four of the most enormous tiger's claws I had ever seen. These were set, but with their sharp points outwards, like four horns.

"Ah! you are admiring that head-dress," said the Marqueza, coming over to where I was standing. "Is it not curious and wonderful? It was the first thing Francesca pounced on when she came to examine the curios. She was quite thrilled with it and examined it most carefully."

"It looks rather a dangerous sort of head-dress if you wanted to kiss the lady," I could not help remarking. "These claw points are as sharp as needles."

"That was the very point remarked by Francesca. There is an old legend attached to this head-dress. It was worn by the favourite lady in the Nizam's zenana, who, in resisting the embraces of a young prince, scratched him with one of the claws, and the young prince died. I long to wear the head-dress, and intend to do so very soon."

"Indeed?" I said.

"Yes, I am going to wear that head-dress, and in this very house," she said, merriment

dancing in her eyes. "Have you not heard, has not Senhor Pinheiro told you, that next week is our great fancy dress masked ball? We always give one before the Carnival. It is the greatest possible fun. Would you like to come? You should see one Portuguese masked ball before you go away."

"I should be delighted," I replied; "only I am afraid I should have some difficulty in getting a suitable dress."

"Not at all; Senhor Pinheiro is sure to have plenty. Yes, you must come, and then you will see me in the wonderful head-dress. I shall look so quaint with that and the mask."

We presently returned to the room where we had left the Duchess and Senhor Pinheiro, and breakfast being ready, we sat down to it on the terrace. My spirits rose. The excellence of the meal, and the conversation of our brilliant and witty hostess, the charming ways and pretty speeches of her daughter, the warm and soft air, the waving palms and the sparkling sea, banished all dark memories.

"I am so glad to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Phenays," said the Duchess. "Come down here and see us whenever you are tired of Lisbon, and want a few hours of fresh air. In any case, we shall expect you both at the ball on Tuesday night."

"Well," said Pinheiro, as we took our seats in the trap, "they are charming people, are they not? Did you make any judicious inquiries concerning Mademoiselle?"

"I talked about her a great deal," I replied, "but learnt very little beyond the self-evident fact that she is a great friend of the Marqueza's. She paid them a flying visit, so the Marqueza told me, and for apparently no reason."

"That is so like her," answered Pinheiro.

"That pretty girl seems deeply attached to her," I continued. "By the way, Pinheiro, have you ever noticed the extraordinary likeness between them?"

A curious change came over the face of the Portuguese, and when I spoke he suddenly clapped his hand on his knee.

"Now that you mention it, I do see it," he replied. "When looking at the Marqueza, I was often puzzled by an intangible likeness. Her face was familiar to me, not on its own account alone. You have solved the mystery. My dear Phenays, we must be on our guard—it is exactly the sort of thing that Mademoiselle would take advantage of."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Ah! I wish I could tell you what I mean: the craftiness and cleverness of that woman

baffles all description. There is no clue she will not seize, and no possible accident she will not avail herself of."

"One thing at least is evident," I said — "the Duchess and her daughter have not the slightest suspicion of her."

"I told you so, and therein also lies danger. Mademoiselle's great power lies in the fact that she can turn men, and women too, round her finger. But never mind," added Pinheiro, glancing at me, and doubtless perceiving the anxiety on my face, "you and I together will be more than a match for her."

I cheered up at these few words, and the next few days were passed in the most enjoyable manner. The Senhor introduced me to many charming people and took me to all the sights of Lisbon. He seldom referred to Mademoiselle Delacourt, and once, when I spoke of her, he replied shortly —

"Don't worry; leave the thing to me. I will tell you one thing. Although I don't speak of that fair lady, she is seldom absent from my thoughts. I am laying my plans slowly and cautiously, and when the moment comes to act I will let you know."

So the days passed pleasantly enough, and at last the night of the fancy ball at Almeida Castle arrived. Pinheiro had helped me to design the fancy dress which I was to wear, and in which, I prided myself, my best friend would not recognise me.

I had just finished dinner on this special evening when the waiter handed me a note from Senhor Pinheiro. "Please come round at once; I want to see you," it ran.

In five minutes' time I was in his room. I found him standing by the open window, a letter in his hand. When he saw me he turned round slowly and gave it to me to read, without a remark.

"Not from Mademoiselle?" I cried. He nodded, but did not speak.

My hand began to tremble, and a sick sensation visited me.

"Read it," said Pinheiro, now showing some impatience. "She has heard that I am at work, and the bluster and bounce show that she is afraid. These, as far as they go, are good signs."

The letter was dated from the Hôtel Bellevue, Taormina, Sicily, and the envelope bore the Sicilian post-mark.

"DEAR SENHOR PINHEIRO" (it ran), "It was such a pleasure to meet you again at Castillo Almeida. I always lament that our

interests should be so much at variance; but it is entirely your own fault. Don't be silly, now, or you will bitterly regret it. Remember that I know everything, and remember that I am still the same. "FRANCESCA.

"P.S.—I have just arrived here. The climate is divine. Why don't you come?"

"What has she gone to Sicily for?" I could not help exclaiming, as I folded the letter and returned it to my host. "I suppose because there is no extradition."

"She is not in Sicily, and has never been there," was the Senhor's reply.

I stared at Pinheiro. "That is her writing and signature," I said, "and the post-mark is Sicilian, of the correct date."

"True, but I had reason to suspect the genuineness of that letter. I have just cabled to the Bellevue, at Taormina, and she is not there. The letter was written and sent to a friend to post there. At present I have no information as to her whereabouts. There is one feature in the letter which I do not like. Beyond doubt it was sent with a purpose. What that purpose is I don't quite know. As far as we are concerned, it means, doubtless, that we must be more on our guard than ever." He gave a little shudder. "I tell you, Phenays, I don't like it."

"You mean that we are in some unknown danger?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly. Nay, I should add probably; but whether or no, I mean to enjoy myself to-night. Go back and dress and come round here, and we will forget Mademoiselle in the mazes of the cotillon."

Though I had expected some gay sights at the Castle Almeida, I certainly was not prepared for the magnificent display that awaited us on our arrival. The beautiful gardens and terraces were hung with festoons of Japanese lanterns and were already astir with revellers in fantastic dresses, and all masked. Upon the polished inlaid floor of the great ballroom many couples were waltzing to the strains of a military band in the gallery. According to our English notions of society, a Portuguese masked ball would seem unaccountable and strange, for all introductions were dispensed with, and as the features of men and women alike were hidden under the mask, it was impossible to tell with whom one was dancing. But there was one lady, at any rate, whom I had no difficulty in recognising, and that was the young Marqueza Ferraz. I had not been in



"The Marqueza uttered a cry and fell against my breast."

the ballroom two minutes before I recognised her. She was dressed as Queen Margarita of Spain, with a large lace ruffle and the most magnificent black Spanish lace arranged round her slender form that I had ever seen. Upon her head she wore the curious Indian head-dress, with its four tiger claws. The effect was marvellous. It gave a strange feline look to the head and face, though the latter was closely hidden by a black mask. I made my way across to her.

"You look magnificent in your beautiful head-dress, Marqueza Ferraz," I said. "I only hope you will be merciful to your partners, for you are armed against any unfavourable advances."

"Yes, *I am armed*, Monsieur Phenays," she replied in so low a voice that, with the noise of the music, I could scarcely catch the words. She gave me a flashing glance from her lovely eyes, and again I could not help likening her to Mademoiselle Delacourt.

"Has Senhor Pinheiro come with you to-night?" she asked.

"Yes, of course; there he is, close to us. Don't you see him. He is dressed as Vasco da Gama, to whom your family owes your head-dress. But will you give me the pleasure of a dance, Marqueza?"

"Later on I shall be delighted." Again she spoke in a whisper, and making me a low bow she moved off among the throng.

It crossed my mind just at that moment that there was something strange and a little unaccountable in her manner. But I had forgotten it the next minute in waltzing with an unknown but magnificent dancer. Several times during the evening I caught sight of the Marqueza waltzing with her many partners. There was a gay *abandon* about all her movements. Her dancing was the perfection of charming and exquisite movements, and I looked forward with pleasure to the moment when I should encircle her slim waist with my arm and conduct her through the mazes of the waltz. From time to time my other partners spoke of the Marqueza, and each and all, when they alluded to her, mentioned her head-dress with a degree of envy.

"It is our great ambition," said one slender girl, looking into my face as she spoke, and flashing at me a pair of magnificent Spanish eyes, "it is our great ambition at our fancy balls to wear something *outré*, strange and unconventional. You can judge for yourself, monsieur," she said, speaking in excellent French, "that such an ambition becomes more and more difficult to gratify

as time goes on, all ideas being used up in advance. Now the Marqueza has exceeded herself to-night. She can be recognised anywhere. Hers is the most distinguished figure at the ball."

I made some suitable reply, and as the hour was midnight, and the time had come when I might claim the fulfilment of the Portuguese girl's promise, I went to seek for her. I wandered into the gardens, and was just passing a fountain which sent its cool spray, full of rosy light, up into the night air, when I heard a light laugh almost in my ear. I turned quickly, but no one was visible; but the next moment the following words were distinctly audible—

"Doesn't she do it well? And the best of the fun is that everyone takes her for me."

The voice was exactly like that of the Marqueza. What did she mean? I called her name, but receiving no answer wandered down further into the grounds. It would not be difficult to find her, on account of her characteristic and towering head-dress. I had sauntered down one of the pathways towards the sea, when suddenly, by the light of a Chinese lantern, I caught sight of her moving swiftly in an opposite direction, along a parallel pathway which separated her from me by a low hedge of laurustine. She was alone, and I stopped and called to her.

"Marqueza!" I cried, "I have come to claim your promise."

She stopped abruptly and waited for me to go up to her.

"Monsieur Phenays?" she said, in courteous tones.

"Yes," I answered.

"I did not recognise you beneath your mask," was her next remark.

"You have the advantage of me, Marqueza," I answered; "you are easily distinguishable, owing to your head-dress."

"Yes," she answered, and her voice was very low.

I had noticed this peculiarity early in the evening, and now, bending towards her, I said—

"You will give me the promised dance?"

"Yes," she replied; "yes, with pleasure."

"But you are tired?" I continued.

"You think so, because I speak low," was her reply. "Sometimes I suffer from a curious affection of the throat, and at times am too indescribably tired to raise my voice."

She stopped in the middle of her sentence and burst into a peal of ringing laughter.



"It was not I who wore that head-dress, but Mademoiselle Delacourt."

That laugh sounded almost offensive. I started away from her side, displeased, I knew not why.

"Come," she said, laying her hand, light as a feather, on my arm, "I am sorry I laughed; but I am subject to uncontrollable mirth at the most inconvenient times. Let us return to the ballroom, where we will enjoy ourselves in the waltz."

We re-entered the magnificent room side

by side. A moment later we were whirling gaily through the waltz. Did I say gaily? That was the maddest time of my life. The blood coursed through my veins with the joyousness of youth. The shadow in which I dwelt sped away from me, and sunlight, gay and joyous, filled my soul. Was there ever such a dancer? She seemed to sweep me up and carry me forward with the gaiety of her movements. We paused, breathless.

"I have met no one who could dance like you," was my remark, when I could speak.

"Such music, such a floor, and such a partner make the thing divine," was her answer. "Shall we take another turn, monsieur?"

Again my arm encircled her waist, and again we whirled in the giddy round. The room was now much more crowded than it had been when we danced a few moments earlier. Couples had arrived in haste from the gardens. The music played an inspiring waltz. The time of the band was so brisk as to be almost maddening. Lighter and quicker were our movements. Suddenly we found ourselves in a dense mass of people. Our way was blocked.

"The other end of the room is nearly empty," I whispered to my partner. "Let us go there—we can dance without being disturbed."

"Yes," she replied, and to my astonishment she moved towards the doorway, through which numerous dancers were pressing. The next instant we were jammed in the doorway. A burly man pushed rudely against us. The Marqueza uttered a cry and fell against my breast. One of the tiger's claws scratched my neck very slightly: but the next moment we were dancing as briskly as ever.

"Why!" suddenly cried the Marqueza, "what is the matter with you, monsieur? Your neck is bleeding."

I took a handkerchief and pressed it to the wound.

"You scratched it," I replied, "with one of the claws of your formidable head-dress."

"Did I not say that I was dangerous?" she answered.

There was a peculiar ring in her voice. It was no longer low and guarded. It reminded me—good God! of whom? I felt my head reel with a sudden fear, and the next moment a sense of chill faintness crept over me.

"You are not dancing well, monsieur," said the voice of the Marqueza. "You are tired. For that matter, so am I. Take me to an anteroom and leave me."

"I will stay with you until your next partner arrives," I answered.

"You must leave me," she said in a peremptory tone. "I wish it. Take me here."

A little boudoir, draped in the palest green silk, stood invitingly open.

We entered, and the Marqueza flung herself on a couch.

"After all, this head-dress worries me," she said. "I should like to take it off."

"Shall I assist you?" I asked.

"Not now," she answered. "Go into the open air—you look faint. We danced too fast: but all the same, it was divine, was it not?"

"Marqueza," I answered, "I have just lived through the most blissful moment of my life."

Her laughter rang out clear, and—did I hear aright?—it seemed to mock me. She motioned me to go, and I went.

A moment later I was seated on a bench in the deep shade of a palm tree.

"Hallo! Phenays, is that you?" called Pinheiro.

"Yes," I answered. "I was dancing with the Marqueza, and we both felt faint."

As I spoke I took out my handkerchief and pressed it to my neck.

"Where is the Marqueza?" asked Pinheiro.

"In one of the anterooms," I replied. "She asked me to leave her."

Again I pressed the handkerchief to my neck.

"I will go and look for her," said Pinheiro. "She promised me this dance. But whatever is the matter?"

"Nothing much," I answered. "Only one of the tiger's claws on that curious head-dress gave me a sharp scratch. But it is not worth talking about."

"What possessed the girl to put on that infernal head-dress? She must be out of her mind to do such a thing!" cried Pinheiro. "Now that I come to think over the matter, I would sooner dance with a cat. I won't trouble to find her."

"The scratch was a mere accident," I replied. "Some thundering idiot cannoned into her."

"I dare say; only one doesn't come to a ball to be torn to pieces by tiger's claws. I wish I could see the young lady, to tell her what I think of her."

"Well, and here she is!" cried a silvery voice, and the Marqueza, unmasked, and with a look of merriment on her face, stood before us.

"Oh, so you have taken it off," said Pinheiro. "You will not be quite such a dangerous partner now, and I don't mind claiming your promise. This is our dance, is it not?"

"You have not asked me for a dance this evening, monsieur."

"Indeed, I did," he replied. "See! here is your name on my programme. But,

hallo! you have made a complete change! Why is that?"

As he spoke I saw the Marqueza was no longer in black Spanish lace, but was clothed from head to foot in some gossamery stuff of shimmering white.

"You have been very quick in changing your dress," I said.

Once again she laughed.

"You don't know the joke we have played upon you," she said. "It is almost too good. I have a great mind to let you find it out for yourselves."

"No, no," said Pinheiro, "you must tell. What joke do you allude to?"

"Oh, I have had such fun!" she exclaimed. "I have been watching you both, and especially you, Monsieur Phenays, for the last half-hour. It was not I who wore that head-dress, but Mademoiselle Delacourt."

I leapt to my feet, and a violent oath passed my lips. Pinheiro stood silent.

"May I ask the reason of this joke?" he asked presently.

"You are not really angry?" cried the girl. "It was only fun. Francesca was at Madrid, and I mentioned to her that you were both going to the ball, and said that I intended to wear the head-dress she so much admired, and that you, Monsieur Phenays, knew that I was going to. Then she wrote to me asking me to let her take my place, and begged me not to say a word to anyone. I am so sorry that the claw scratched you, Monsieur Phenays. It is not serious, is it?"

"Time will prove," said Pinheiro. His face was deadly white. "You don't know what mischief you, in all innocence, have done, Marqueza. But now, don't keep us. If anything can save my friend, there is not an instant to lose."

As Pinheiro spoke he put his arm round my waist and raised me from the seat into which I had sunk.

"Come at once, and quietly," he said. "We will get back to Lisbon without a moment's delay. Without doubt you have been poisoned, but there may be hope if we take the matter in time."

While he was whispering to me he was dragging me, for I was now incapable of walking, in the direction of the house.

The Marqueza, startled and alarmed, walked by our side.

"I wish you would explain," she said. "You have made me so terribly unhappy. What, oh, *what* is wrong?"

"Find the head-dress, Marqueza," said Pinheiro, "and if possible, and if you have

the nerve, detain Mademoiselle Delacourt. Phenays, I will leave you for an instant, on this seat close to the house, while I fetch the carriage and give instructions to the police to watch everyone who leaves the Castle."

A sudden shiver of intense cold passed over me. Pinheiro disappeared round the corner of the brilliantly lighted house, and the young Marqueza seated herself by my side.

"I am so sorry and so terrified," she whispered. "What, oh, what can be wrong?"

"Pinheiro will tell you to-morrow," I answered in a whisper. "But do not blame yourself, please. It was my own fault, for not being more careful."

Just then Pinheiro appeared.

"The carriage is waiting," he said. "I will call early to-morrow and explain everything to your mother, Marqueza. Now, Phenays."

I was helped into the carriage, and soon afterwards Pinheiro and I arrived at my hotel at Lisbon.

The doctor had been summoned. He examined my wound and told Pinheiro that I had, without doubt, been inoculated with some deadly micro-organisms.

"Will it be fatal?" I whispered.

"You are in danger," was his slow reply. "But you look strong, and must be healthy; there ought to be hope. You should have a good nurse, however, as your symptoms will require careful watching."

"I will sit up with Monsieur Phenays to-night," said Pinheiro. "I got him into this trouble, and have made up my mind to pull him through *at any cost*."

Through the long hours of that night Pinheiro never left my side. At short intervals he administered stimulant after stimulant, and by so doing kept the dread enemy Death at bay.

In the morning I was still alive, but through the days and week that followed my life hung in the balance. How I did recover in the end will always appear to me little short of a miracle.

When I was well enough for Pinheiro to leave me, he went back to Almeida Castle and told Mademoiselle Delacourt's true story to the Duchess and the Marqueza. The distress of both was beyond description. The head-dress was examined, and even now traces of the deadly poison in which the tiger's claws had been dipped were found upon them. But, alas! Mademoiselle herself was gone.

From the moment I left her in the green anteroom she had not been seen or heard of at Castle Almeida.

THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

By L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.*

No. IV.—A CONJURING TRICK.



"ATHER a strange game is this of ours," said Pinheiro to me one afternoon.

I was better again, although still quite the wreck of my former self. I was lying on the balcony in his house and enjoying the delicious air. The tone of his voice as he now spoke startled me, his eyes were gloomy and full of trouble.

"Of course, Phenays, you clearly understand that we are both playing for the same stake," he continued. "Mademoiselle Delacourt is the stake, and we shall get her yet."

I smiled. "I wish I could agree with you," I answered; "but the more I think of that woman, the more she overpowers me, and the more I feel that she will always elude us."

"No," he answered, "not for ever; we shall have her yet." He had scarcely uttered the words before the servant entered the room bearing a letter which was addressed to me and had an English post-mark on it. I opened it hastily and in some fear. Had my lawyer in London had news to convey? One glance, however, reassured me. The letter was from an old friend of my father's, a certain Sir James Noel, of the War Office. It ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR PHENAYS, —I am wondering if you are home again. I want to see you very particularly, so I write this on the chance that it will be forwarded to your present address, wherever it happens to be. You will be surprised to learn that your old friend Evelyn is engaged—the wedding is to take place in less than a month. She is about to marry my private secretary, Mr. Monck, a very clever fellow who has been in my employment for some time. Monck has lately come in for a considerable property, and will leave me immediately after the

wedding. I want someone to take his place, and it has occurred to me that you might like the post. It is essential that I should have a man with me on whom I can absolutely rely. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that hostilities between this country and the Transvaal are more than likely. Will you wire me your answer on receipt of this? I beg you to come if possible. There is more in my request than meets the eye.

"Yours, in haste,
"JAMES NOEL."

"It is odd," I said, handing the letter across to my friend. "I seem destined to be mixed up with this infernal war. Read the letter, Pinheiro, and tell me what I should do."

Pinheiro read Sir James Noel's communication very quietly. When he came to the end, a grim smile played round the corners of his lips.

"The gods fight for us at last," he said. "This is magnificent!"

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"My dear fellow, if we had arranged the thing it could not have been better. Let me send off a wire for you at once, accepting the offer."

A sudden animation lit up his face and gleamed in his eyes.

"You are thinking of the last sentence in Sir James Noel's letter," I remarked.

"Possibly I am," he answered; "but do you not see for yourself the immense advantage we shall gain by being once more in touch with the enemy?"

"But how shall we be in touch? I fail to understand."

"Judging from information received, I shall be much surprised if Mademoiselle Delacourt is not poking her delicate little thumb into War Office secrets. You must accept, and at once, Phenays."

"But am I justified? Remember, I am wanted by the French Secret Service in connection with supposed war secrets, although, of course, I possess none."

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"You must tell Sir James everything," was his answer. "What you know may be of the greatest service to the War Office. Now, my dear fellow, do not, I implore you, throw away this great chance of silencing that dreadful woman, perhaps for ever. Remember what it means—your freedom from further persecution, and" (his voice hardened) "I shall have squared my account. Phenays, you must be the mouse to lure the cat in the direction of the trap."

"Thank you! What a cheerful situation! But suppose I get a scratch from her claws?"

"If you trust me, you will run no risks. Now, are you going to accept?"

"I suppose so," I answered after a moment, during which I was thinking hard. "It seems preposterous and unreasonable and a little mad, but no doubt you are right. Will you send a wire for me?"

"Will I?" he replied. "With a thousand congratulations, my good friend. Before Heaven! this fires me with new life." He rushed from the room.

A few hours later I had Sir James's reply. He begged me to take the first possible train to London. The Sud express left Lisbon the next day, and Pinheiro and I arranged to go by it. We sat long into the night discussing our plans, and four days later we found ourselves once again on English soil, embarked in one of the strangest games two men were ever destined to play.

I wired to Sir James to say that I should be in London at midday, and on our arrival at my chambers, to my surprise and delight, I found the good baronet waiting for me.

"Delighted to see you, my boy!" he said, coming forward and grasping my hand. "It is most good of you to come so promptly. Your arrival is the greatest relief to me."

"May I introduce my friend, Senhor Pinheiro?" I said.

Pinheiro bowed and began to talk at once in his excellent and fluent English.

"I will leave you both," he said after a moment or two: "I want to secure rooms at the Berkeley."

When he was gone, Sir James began to speak in a serious tone.

"My dear Phenays," he said, "I regard this acceptance of yours as most lucky. You,



"Delighted to see you, my boy!"

of course, appreciate the responsibility of the appointment you have agreed to take, but I may as well tell you at once it is due to a very special reason that I have chosen you. There are some extraordinary things happening, and it is not only our mission, but our duty to find out what they are."

"I do not understand you, sir," I answered: "but," I continued, "before we proceed further, it is only right that you should know the strange and terrible position in which I myself am placed. Can you listen? I cannot accept this appointment until you know the whole truth."

"Tell me, Phenays, and be quick," was his answer.

He sank into a seat near the window, and turning his back on the outside world listened with attention while I gave him a rapid and precise *résumé* of the strange events which had come into my life during the last few months. Before I reached the end I could see that he was much excited, and as I finished he leapt to his feet.

"So Mademoiselle Delacourt has been hunting you down?" he said. "She is under the supposition that you possess one of the French Secret Service secrets?"

"Precisely, and she has on three occasions very nearly succeeded in her designs," I answered with a shudder. "That scratch from the tiger's claw was a near thing—touch and go, in fact."

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "She may be the mysterious and powerful centre from which all my present troubles arise. What you have told me is of the greatest importance to us. As a matter of fact, we are just now in a fine mess. The emissaries and spies of our enemies in the Transvaal are ever on the watch. The best detectives are hard at work to discover their whereabouts and modes of operation, but can do nothing. Listen. This is what has just happened—it is worrying me to my grave. On two occasions lately we have discovered that some of our most private secrets in connection with our armaments and reserves have found their way to the Transvaal through French channels, and the horror of the whole thing is that they are secrets for which I alone am responsible. Everything conceivable has been done to discover the traitor, but the man to do so has yet to be found."

"Then I can name him," I cried. "The man of all men for your work—you have just seen him—Senhor Pinheiro. Political intrigue is his speciality. He speaks almost every European language, and is well known to the police in all the capitals of Europe. He is a Portuguese by birth, but I know for certain that he will be ready and willing to throw himself into the work of this business immediately. He is also implicitly trustworthy. If Mademoiselle Delacourt should be at the bottom of all your trouble, rest assured Senhor Pinheiro will not fail to discover her."

"Has he, too, fallen into the trap of that woman?" asked Sir James.

"Yes," I answered, lowering my voice to a whisper; "the object of his life is to revenge himself. Did you notice that one of his hands lacks two fingers? He owes that to Mademoiselle; but how she did it, and when, I know not, for he will not reveal his secret."

Sir James rubbed his hands with pleasure.

"The arrival of your friend is most opportune," he said; "but we must move rapidly. Now listen! In affairs of such immense importance I cannot employ Pinheiro without getting permission from Scotland Yard. This is a mere form, of course, and I will go there immediately. Phenays, you and Pinheiro must come down to Warleigh Court to-night

and dine and sleep. You will be glad to see Evelyn and my wife again, and I want to introduce you both to Monck—my present secretary. He is as troubled over this matter as I am. Now I will leave you, for there is much to be done."

Sir James went off at once, and I strolled across to the Berkeley. I found Pinheiro enjoying an excellent lunch, and I immediately told him the news.

"This is capital," was his reply. "I shall have some business on my own account to transact this afternoon, and will meet you and Sir James at Baker Street at 6.10."

"You know London well," I remarked. He smiled.

"I lived in London for many years," he said, after a pause. "In those days I was light-hearted and happy; but that was before——" His face grew dark and a frown knit his forehead.

I looked at him with admiration. To the outward eye he was only a very thin, hollow-checked, dark-looking man, in apparently bad health. It was difficult to realise that he was in reality one of the keenest detectives in Europe—a man to be trusted as men trust those they care most for.

We arrived at Warleigh Court just in time to dress for dinner. I was down before Pinheiro, and had scarcely spoken to Lady Noel and Evelyn before Monck appeared. I was naturally interested in the man who was to marry Evelyn, and whose place I was to take as Noel's private secretary. He was tall, good-looking, and self-possessed. His manner was that of one used to society, he had a low voice and a pleasant accent. On the whole, he was the sort of person to impress one favourably; but as I looked at him, I wondered if he was worthy of Evelyn, whom I had known from a child, and had always regarded with special affection. She was a very beautiful and spirited girl, barely nineteen years of age—I thought her far too young to be Monck's wife, and wondered why Sir James consented to the marriage. She was, to all appearance, in high spirits, and laughed and chatted volubly; but I could not help an uneasy fear that her mirth was a little forced, and once again I looked at Monck to discover the cause. As I glanced at him our eyes met. His eyes were peculiar—very light grey in colour, with black rims round the irises, and thick black lashes. Handsome eyes in themselves, but I did not care for their expression. Instinctively I drew nearer to Evelyn, as if I would protect her, and then, ashamed of

myself, entered into an animated conversation with Lady Noel.

During dinner Pinheiro made himself agreeable. He talked on the varied subjects of the day with ease and distinction. It was only when the possible war with the Transvaal was mentioned that he remained silent.

As soon as the ladies had withdrawn, Sir James lowered his voice and began to speak on the subject that was uppermost in all our minds.

"It has been a great pleasure to welcome you here as a guest," he said, turning to Pinheiro. "It is even a greater pleasure to make your acquaintance in your professional capacity. I have been to Scotland Yard to-day, and have secured your services in connection with a very serious official question. Inspector Scott welcomes your co-operation and authorises me to give you my fullest confidence."

"You can depend on my doing my best," answered Pinheiro. "And now," he added, "I have something to say on my own account. I also called on Inspector Scott this afternoon, and have heard from him most of the details of this extremely interesting case. The last instance of treachery relates to armaments which were to be immediately despatched to South Africa. The particulars were mentioned by you, Sir James, in a sealed despatch to the Colonial Office, and were known only to you and to your secretary, Mr. Monck. Now, one thing is evident, we are face to face with some entirely new criminal method, of which there has been no previous experience in the annals of crime; otherwise, such information could not have been obtained by a spy. There is no doubt whatever that it was through Paris that this information was forwarded to President Kruger. Of course, I can speak freely in the presence of Mr. Monck?"

"Certainly," cried Sir James. "Monck is my private secretary."

"Then I shall betray no confidence when I make a remark? Mr. Phenays has already told you how by an extraordinary coincidence he and I are both in touch with that most dreadful gang of spies, at the head of which is Mademoiselle Delacourt."

At these words Monck got up slowly, went to the door and turned the key in the lock.

"What is the matter, Monck?" said Sir James, irritation in his tone.

"Nothing, Sir James. As we are talking

on such very private matters, I thought it best to secure our not being interrupted."

Pinheiro gave the private secretary a keen glance, then looked at Sir James.

"I know all about your adventures in Portugal," said the baronet. "But now to return once more to my own affairs. The day after to-morrow I shall be sending in my communication to the Foreign Office in reference to shell ammunition. Of course, the usual secrecy will be exercised, but, should this matter leak out, as other matters have done, the result will be most disastrous. I shall, of course, have to give up my appointment at the War Office, my reputation will be damaged, I shall be a ruined man. But why should I talk of my private affairs? The disaster to the country at large is what one has to guard against."

"Your position is a very grave one," said Pinheiro, "and you will have to use the utmost caution, remembering the system of espionage to which you are doubtless subjected. Now, I am taking up this matter, and shall work with Inspector Scott, and will not trouble you with any further discussion. I by no means despair of solving the riddle—perhaps before your wedding-day, sir." Here Pinheiro bowed to Monck. "I shall leave here early in the morning and return to town," he added. "By the way, Mr. Monck, I must add my trifle to Miss Noel's wedding presents. Can you tell me the name of a good jeweller?"

Monck mentioned the name of a West End firm, and then added, "But you must not think of giving us a present, Senhor."

"Pray scribble the number down," said Pinheiro, passing him an old envelope. He did so and returned it to the Portuguese. When we joined the ladies, Evelyn came to my side.

"I have been wanting to talk to you," she said. "Come into the conservatory. Oh, do be quick! I don't want father to ask me to sing."

The girl's face was grave and even old for her years. I wondered at its expression, and my heart beat for a moment a little quicker than usual, while a strange sensation of apprehension swept like a cold wind through my frame. We strolled into the conservatory.

Evelyn paused by a magnolia tree in full flower, and plucking one of the blossoms began to pull it to pieces.

"Now, tell me," she said quickly. "What is the matter? What is wrong?"

"How do you know there is anything wrong?" I asked.

She stamped her foot. "Am I a child?" she asked. "My mother notices nothing, but I am not blind. My father is in trouble; there is a burden on his heart. Has he confided it to you?"

"He has," I said after a pause. "There is something the matter. It relates to his work at the War Office. I must not tell you more. I cannot betray his confidence, can I?"

"You have told me all I want to know," she replied. She stood still, looking straight before her; her beautiful eyes were full of intense trouble, almost despair. Suddenly they filled to the brim with large drops which rolled down her cheeks. She bent towards me, her voice low and troubled.

"My father's unhappiness has something to do with Reginald Monck."

"What do you mean?" I could not help exclaiming. "You are engaged to Monck."

"I know, I know."

"And you are happy? It cannot be otherwise. I have known you, Evelyn, from a child. Tell me that you are happy: you

love the man whom you are about to marry?"

"No," she said in a low voice. "But I am marrying him because it is the only way in which I can save my father."

"Evelyn, what can I do for you? This is terrible!"

We had reached the farther end of the conservatory; there was a door here which led on to the lawn. Evelyn opened it and we both stepped out.

"I can no more confide in you than you can confide in me," she said. "But I will give you one commission for the sake of old times. Discover the truth."

"If I only could!" I exclaimed.

"You must go back. I am suspected. I feel as if the air were full of spies. You cannot guess what I am enduring, Mr. Phenays. For the sake of our old friendship, discover the truth."

"I will," I said; and she left me.

That night I followed Pinheiro into his bedroom.

"What do you think of matters?" I asked.

"Can Mademoiselle Delacourt be at the bottom of this mystery?"

"Ask me no questions," answered Pinheiro. "I have hope, and it points in a certain direction; but I may be wrong, of course. If there is one person more than another whom I pity in this unfortunate affair, it is Miss Noel. She is little more than a child—the man is double her age. What could have induced her father to consent to the engagement? Why, the girl is not even happy."

"What eyes you have, my friend!" I could not help remarking.

He smiled.

"Practice," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

I left him and went to my own room; but, although very tired after my long journey, I could not sleep. Evelyn's words haunted me.

"Discover the truth," she had said. How was I to do so?

The next day Sir James,



"She bent towards me, her voice low and troubled."

Pinheiro, and Monck went up to town, but I remained at Warleigh Court. I felt tempted to take advantage of the opportunity to draw some further confidences from Evelyn, but she avoided me, devoting herself absolutely to her mother, from whose side she never stirred.

The men returned in time for dinner, and just before dressing Pinheiro drew me aside.

"I intend to do some conjuring tricks to-night, Phenays," he said. "Back me up, will you?"

will be a return to my childish days. Be sure of one thing, Senhor—whenever you score a trick, I shall clap you."

Pinheiro laughed, and Monck drew near and stood by her side. They made a handsome couple, and a cursory observer would have augured well for the proposed match.

In a few moments Pinheiro was busy with cards, coins, hats, and handkerchiefs, delighting us all with his cleverness and sleight-of-hand. As I watched his deft white fingers and the eager expression on his face, while



"Yes," he answered; "and I have scored well."

"Certainly; but what a strange idea!"

"Oh, I just want to amuse the company. I am rather clever at sleight-of-hand."

We entered the drawing-room. After dinner Pinheiro proposed to act magician for the occasion. His proposition was hailed with pleasure, and Evelyn, in particular, expressed her approval.

"Fancy being in the presence of a real live conjurer once more," she said. "a man who draws ribbons out of hats, and makes coins spin as if they were alive. This

he made his passes, rattling off a patter with each new trick, I could not help thinking of the Great Conjuring Trick, involving tremendous issues, in which he was himself engaged.

"And now," he said, after he had amused us with his clever performances for about a quarter of an hour, "I mean to give you my last and, I hope, my most remarkable trick.

"Will someone in the room write a sentence—any sentence will do? Perhaps, Miss

Noel, you will oblige me? When you have written your sentence, fold up the paper, do not show it to anyone, but put it into that hat. Meanwhile, I will leave the room and write the same sentence outside."

"But how can you," cried Lady Noel, "when you won't know anything about Evelyn's choice?"

"Have you never heard of thought-reading, dear madam?" asked Pinheiro, bowing in his most graceful manner.

Evelyn tripped eagerly across the room, took a piece of paper, wrote something on it, carefully folded the paper, and placed it inside the magician's hat. She then placed it on the piano, where no one could possibly disturb it, and Pinheiro, taking up another sheet of paper, prepared to leave the room.

"I have left my pen upstairs," he suddenly exclaimed. "Will you lend me your stylographic pen, Mr. Monck?"

Monck immediately gave him the pen, and Pinheiro left the room. He returned in a few moments, holding a folded piece of paper in his hand.

"Now, Miss Noel," he said, "will you read your sentence aloud?"

Evelyn took the piece of paper out of the hat and read in a clear voice, so that everyone in the room could hear, the well-known proverb, "STILL WATERS RUN DEEP."

Pinheiro smiled. He then unfolded his paper, and read, with the calm assurance of a man certain of having scored his trick, the equally well-known proverb, "HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY."

There was a moment's pause of dead silence in the room, then I exclaimed, "You have not done the trick!"

"Yes," he answered gravely; "and I have scored *well*."

There was something very peculiar and almost uncanny in his words. His eyes danced with triumph. Finally they rested on Monck. "I have scored," he repeated. "I will explain, I hope, before your wedding, Miss Evelyn."

Everyone looked surprised and disappointed, and Lady Noel said in a cold voice—

"I fail to understand."

When we went to our rooms, I said to Pinheiro—

"You really are an enigma. How can you pretend that you guessed Evelyn's sentence?"

Pinheiro rubbed his hands. "I admit that I gave you all a hard nut to crack," he said; "but the riddle will be explained, all

being well, before the wedding, Phenays. Cheer up! things are progressing favourably."

"Pinheiro," I said, "I would give almost anything in the world to prevent this marriage."

His eyes twinkled. "How strange!" he said. "Those are precisely my sentiments." As he spoke he left the room.

The next morning my friend and I both left Warleigh Court, promising to return the following Tuesday for the wedding.

Sir James and Monck travelled up to town with us, and when we got to St. John's Wood, Inspector Scott met us at the station. I thought Pinheiro would have gone off with him, but, to my surprise, he expressed his intention of returning to my rooms with me.

"What are you going to do?" I asked. "I thought you would spend to-day at the War Office?"

"No," he replied, "I shall spend to-day in your rooms, Phenays. Dear, dear! this is a wicked world!"

I could not get any information out of him, and gave way to a sense of annoyance. When time was so short, and so much hung in the balance, how could he be content to sit down with his hands before him? Nevertheless, strange or not, this was precisely what Pinheiro did intend to do. He looked morose and disagreeable, and, as far as I could tell, did not move a finger to elucidate the mystery.

At last the all-important day arrived.

The wedding was fixed for twelve o'clock, but soon after ten Pinheiro and I arrived at Warleigh Court. Already some forty other guests had assembled.

I went to seek Sir James in his study. His face wore a very perturbed expression.

"Has Pinheiro come?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Well, I must see him at once. The worst has happened. I am almost mad! Once more my secret information has leaked out. This sort of thing cannot go on, and I must of course resign my position at the War Office."

"I am bitterly sorry for you," I answered. "Poor Evelyn! what a sad wedding-day for her!"

"Her attitude puzzles me also," said Noel, raising his anxious face to mine. "I doubt if the child is happy. Her mother tells me that she cried herself to sleep last night."

"For Heaven's sake!" I could not help exclaiming, "do not let this marriage go on if there is any doubt on that point. Though

it is the eleventh hour, there is still time to stop it."

"No, no," he said, after a moment of deep thought. "Most girls are nervous on occasions like the present, and Evelyn always knew her own mind. Beyond doubt she is deeply attached to Monck; she has had good opportunities of studying his character, for he has been my secretary over two years."

"You would like to see Senhor Pinheiro," I said, after a pause. "Shall I fetch him for you?"

He had sunk into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Now he started up.

"My thoughts are in a whirl," he exclaimed. "What with the wedding, and this fearful, this disgraceful business, I do not know what I am doing. To tell the truth, Phenays, I am disappointed in your friend. He seems to have done nothing to help us."

"Neither can I understand him," I answered. "But here he comes to answer for himself."

The door opened and Pinheiro entered. A complete change had come over him. During the last few days he had been languid and even lethargic. Now a queer excitement filled him. He carried a small bag in his hand, and also a long, blue envelope.

"Sir James," he said, speaking with rapidity, "I hold in this bag the wedding present which I mean to give to your son-in-law, and in this envelope I hold something else. But to business. I am grieved to have to perform a most disagreeable duty at once."

"What do you mean?" cried Sir James, springing to his feet. "Have you found a clue?"

"It looks like it," answered Pinheiro, opening the bag; "but we will soon tell. Inspector Scott is here. He is in plain clothes. Do not alarm Miss Noel. The matter won't take five minutes. Can I see Monck?"

My heart began to beat. What on earth was going to happen?

Sir James rang the bell.

"Ask Mr. Monck to be good enough to step here," he said to the servant who entered.

The man withdrew, and in another moment Monck, dressed for his wedding and looking particularly handsome, entered the room, accompanied by Inspector Scott.

"This must mean good news, Senhor Pinheiro," he exclaimed. "You would not bring Inspector Scott down here for nothing.

I hope that you are going to put all our doubts to rest."

By way of answer Pinheiro drew a small sheet of paper from the envelope.

"This paper was signed yesterday in Paris," he said. "It was written by someone in England, and conveyed to someone in Paris the full particulars of a private despatch written by Sir James Noel last Thursday. It is in the form of a letter which is apparently written to a friend, but that is of no consequence. Is anything the matter, Mr. Monck?"

"Nothing. Excuse me—I have forgotten a certain matter; I will be back in a moment."

"You must not leave the room just at present, sir," here interrupted Inspector Scott; "you must hear the rest of what this gentleman has to say."

Monck leant against the frame of the window. I saw that his face was white and that his lips trembled.

Without taking any further notice of him, Pinheiro now produced some chemical apparatus from his bag. He proceeded to arrange it. When everything was in order, he looked straight up at Monck, and said in a short, jerky voice—

"I propose, sir, to give you this as your wedding present. Now, pray listen. I must crave your earnest attention, gentlemen. I have here in this glass vessel some zinc trimmings. Observe that I add some diluted sulphuric acid to the trimmings. Hydrogen gas is now evolved. This I will set light to."

As he spoke he struck a match, and, applying it to the opening of the little glass tube, a pale flame began to burn.

"So far, so good, gentlemen," continued Pinheiro. "I now proceed to the next part of my interesting work. I will moisten a portion of this letter" (here he tore off a piece from the letter which he had taken from the blue envelope, and dipped it into water). "I add this paper to the contents of the glass vessel. If now this pale blue flame is changed to lilac colour, and gives me a black deposit at the bottom of this plate that I hold over the flame" (he raised an ordinary dinner-plate in his hand as he spoke), "arsenic is proved to be present in the ink with which it is written."

We all gazed at him in utter amazement; not one word was spoken. I had not the slightest notion of what it meant, but I noticed that Pinheiro's long fingers trembled as he added the moistened paper to the



“‘Have you broken your word?’”

vessel. Almost instantly the flame changed to a distinct lilac colour. He then applied the plate to the flame, and a black, sooty deposit was at once formed. When this happened, he looked up and nodded to Inspector Scott. Before any of us could move or utter a sound, the latter laid his hand on Monck's shoulder.

"I arrest you, Reginald James Monck, on the charge of high treason to Her Majesty's Government."

If a thunderbolt had fallen in the room, the sensation could not have been more profound.

Sir James uttered a sharp cry and reeled back against the mantelpiece. His face was the colour of clay.

"What does it mean?" he exclaimed. "You prove that there is arsenic in the ink of certain writing. What has that got to do with my friend? Monck, speak, man, speak! You look as if a devil had struck you. What is wrong? Why, you were just about to become my child's husband! Pinheiro, explain matters, or I shall go raving mad!"

Pinheiro glanced at me, nodded emphatically, and then stepped forward.

"My explanation is quickly given," he said. "It scarcely needed a wise man to be sure that you had a traitor in the camp, Sir James. The question was, Who? Why did I suspect Monck? I will tell you. He has lately come into a good deal of money—into sufficient money to enable him to be a suitor for your daughter's hand. I found on inquiry that he had lately received a legacy from an uncle; but this legacy, instead of amounting to £50,000, as he gave you to understand, was only worth £2,000. As I discovered that he had £50,000 in his possession, my wonder was naturally raised as to how he had obtained it. The diamond ring which he gave to your daughter cost £500. I asked him the name of his jeweller the first night at dinner with the express object of making this inquiry. He wrote the address of the man with his stylographic pen, and at that instant I saw my opportunity of a possible proof. I went to town, thought matters out, and arranged my little performance. You may remember, Sir James, that I did some simple conjuring tricks in your drawing-room last week. You will doubtless recall the fact that my last so-called trick turned out a failure. I told you then that I had scored. I mean now to explain how.

"I asked Monck to lend me his stylographic

pen in order to write a sentence, which was supposed to be the same as the one your daughter wrote, in the hall. While there, I opened the pen and inserted a grain of arsenious acid—such a small amount as would make no difference in the use of the pen.

"This happened the night before the next attempt at obtaining Government secrets would be attempted. Everything now depended on whether the paper which was sent to Paris, and there seized by our man, had arsenic on it or not. I put the police on the watch, and an agent of Mademoiselle Delacourt's was arrested yesterday with this letter on his person. The handwriting would have afforded no proof, but the arsenic test is absolute. Marsh's test is so delicate that there was plenty of arsenic in the ink to give a reaction, as you saw."

Pinheiro had scarcely finished speaking before the bride, in all her bridal finery, entered the room.

"Go away, Evelyn! Go away! This is not the place for you!" cried her father. "I will see you presently!" he continued, in a voice of agony.

"I want to hear what you are talking about," she replied gently, and her eyes travelled round the room. "Tell your story to me, Senhor Pinheiro."

"Nay, Miss Noel," he answered; "the story is told."

"Go, Evelyn! Go, I pray of you!" said Sir James again.

She did not seem to hear him. For the first time she noticed something unusual about Monck. He was standing near the wall. Inspector Scott's hand still rested on his shoulder—his eyes were fixed on the ground, his face was cadaverous.

Into the girl's eyes now there leapt a curious light. A sort of unholy joy filled them. She went up to Monck and almost hissed her words into his ear.

"Have you broken your word? Have you been doing it again, *traitor!* and has he" (she flung out her arm in the direction of Pinheiro) "found you out? Then I am saved."

She tottered up against the table; her breath came fast, her lips trembled, but her eyes were bright and tearless.

We all clustered round her. Pinheiro took her hand.

"This man has been arrested on a charge of high treason," he said. "If you have anything to tell, tell it now. Silence is no longer possible."

"Then I will speak," she said. She rose

and stood before us. "Think of me as you like," she said. "But this is my story—my terrible story. Two years ago I met Mademoiselle Delacourt in Paris. I was a child—only seventeen. She fascinated me and got me into her power. Without intending it, I told her much about our life and my father's work. I was unconscious of having done wrong. Soon after we returned home, that man" (here she motioned in the direction of Monck) "applied for the post of private secretary to my father. I saw him first, for he came here, and he gave me, when no one was by, a letter from Mademoiselle.

"'You are in my power,' she wrote. 'Use your influence to get the post he covets for Reginald Monck.'

"I read the letter in his presence and looked my astonishment, and he explained *horribly*. I was frightened, terrified! I fell into the trap. From that moment my

life was hell. I was in his power as well as hers. For a time he was careful, and nothing apparently happened; but this year the work of treachery began. I knew that my father's secrets were betrayed, and I knew that he was the traitor. In my awful agony I cried to him for mercy. Then he made a compromise. If I would consent to marry him, he would leave my father's employment, and from the hour I promised to be his wife he would never betray another secret. I promised, in order to save my father. To-day was to be the day of my marriage, but he has broken his word. He has sold us again."

She paused, uttering a cry. In an instant her father's arms were round her.

"My darling! my poor darling!" I heard him say.

In absolute silence Inspector Scott conveyed Monck from the room. Pinheiro and I followed.



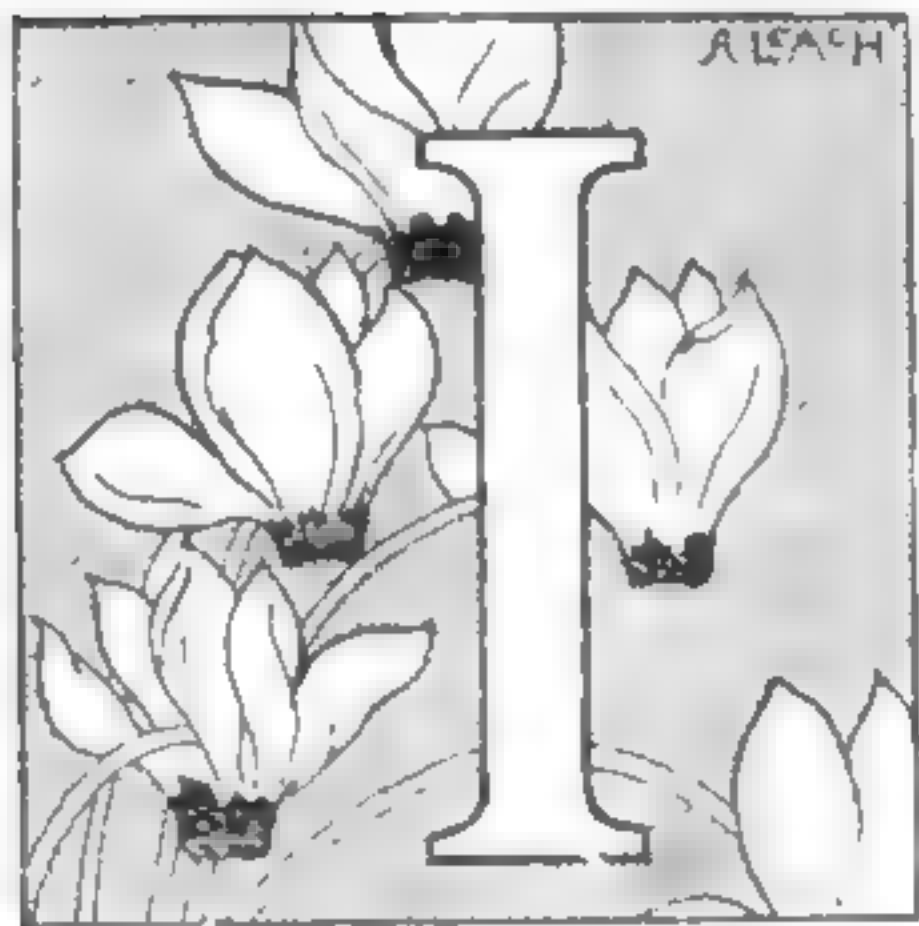
"LIKE GRANDMA!"

From the picture by A. Gandy.

THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

By L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.*

No. V.—A GALLOP WITH THE STORM.



It was a couple of months since the events took place which I mentioned in my last story. Evelyn Noel had recovered her spirits. As I looked at her bright face and slim, upright figure, and listened once again to her merry laugh, I could scarcely believe she was the same girl who had stood in Sir James's study and told her terrible story. How very nearly her whole young life had been wrecked! but, also, how quickly she had recovered! I wondered if all girls were made alike; if a girl's nature was such that she could be reduced to the last gasp of despair one moment, and the next could sing about the house and be radiant and happy, its sunbeam and source of rejoicing once more.

Sir James and Lady Noel begged of me never to mention the hated name of Reginald Monck in the girl's presence, and when his trial came on, which it did about that time, it was my duty to keep the newspapers as much as possible from her sight.

I was collecting them one morning to take into Sir James's study, when she came into the hall and stopped me with a smile.

"What are you doing, Mr. Phenays?" she asked.

"Sir James wants the papers," I said. "He likes to look over them when he returns in the evening."

"My father is not at home; he will not be home until five o'clock."

"That is true," I answered, "but I may as well attend to his wishes now."

"I know why you do it," she said suddenly. "Mr. Phenays, I want to tell you something."

I have read all the particulars with regard to Mr. Monck's trial already this morning. I am not fretting," she added. "I am too thankful. But you may tell my father and mother that it is useless to keep things from my knowledge. I am no longer a child, and cannot be treated as such."

Tears filled her eyes.

"What should I have done but for you and Senhor Pinheiro?" she continued. "I can never, never be sufficiently thankful that you, Mr. Phenays, returned to England when you did, and also that you brought your Portuguese friend with you."

She stretched out her hand and took mine as she spoke—the tears overflowed her lovely eyes. But the next moment she had flown across the hall and was singing in the garden.

As I listened to her voice, and remembered the look on her face a moment before, I could not help saying to myself—

"What a wonderful creature is woman!"

The next day was Sunday. I have good cause to remember that day. It was the 10th of June, 1899. For the past week the weather had been sultry in the extreme. Day after day the forecasts prophesied storms and thunder; but the storms did not come, and the sky, as far as rain was concerned, was like brass.

The great heat made us all languid, and on this special afternoon Sir James and I were taking shelter under a wide-spreading cedar tree just at one end of the smoothly kept lawn. The tea-table was standing near. Evelyn had poured out tea for us both and had then gone into the house.

"I am going to sit with mother and read to her," she said, turning her bright face towards Sir James. "She has a headache. She says there is so much electricity in the air."

"There is little doubt of that," was my comment, and I raised my eyes to look at the sky.

It was blue, with the intense blue of perfect summer; but towards the horizon were suspicious-looking banks of clouds, piled one

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above the other. I wondered if the storm which had so long tarried would be on us that night.

Sir James uttered lazy, disconnected sentences at intervals. The heat, and considerable fatigue owing to a long week of hard work, had rendered him sleepy. Presently he remarked—

"I wonder when Pinheiro will pay us another visit?"

"Senhor Pinheiro will not come until he brings us news," was my answer, and I could not help sighing as I spoke.

"What is the matter, Phenays?" said my employer, turning and gazing at me. "It is impossible that you can feel apprehension now. You have lived, it is true,



"Part of it looked as if it had been freshly dug."

on the brink of a catastrophe; but even that dreadful woman, Mademoiselle Delacourt, must have played and lost her last trick when Reginald Monck failed in his mission."

"I do not believe so for a moment," was my answer. "You must remember, Sir James, that three times before the affair with your late secretary, Mademoiselle attempted my life. What she has done three times she will do again. She is a terrible woman. Although I ought to be a happy man, with such genial employment, and so kind and considerate a friend as yourself, yet I live always on the brink of a precipice. At any moment, night or day, my life may be required of me, and my great foe spring to fresh existence."

Sir James suddenly lost his sleepy manner. He started forward and spoke with emphasis. "I do not want to trouble you," he said. "As a matter of fact, I left you here during the whole of last week solely with the view of sparing you anxiety. But we are all very anxious at headquarters, and there is the feeling with more than one that the spy element has not been eliminated. This war—and I see no possible solution of the Transvaal question without it—must be unlike any previous one. Science—our friend in the construction of weapons, in tactics, in balloons, in wireless telegraphy—is equally our enemy when we approach the field of Secret Service. Our spies now have a competent knowledge of our preparations and movements, by methods altogether unknown in the days of the Peninsular and Crimean wars. A thousand eyes are watching us, and a thousand ears listen for our faintest footfalls. If these eyes and ears are invisible, that makes the danger all the greater. As Macbeth said, 'Even the ground prates of our whereabouts.' There is danger everywhere. You know it."

"Alas!" I cried, "I know it far too well; and the woman whom I so greatly fear is beyond doubt in the pay of the enemy. She is a fiend in human shape. So far as we are concerned, she is the great centre; she is the spider that sits in the web to which all lines lead. There is only one man in Europe who can lay her by the heels. You have seen something of his methods in the case of your late secretary."

"I certainly have. Pinheiro is one in a thousand."

"If anyone will succeed in capturing Mademoiselle, he is the man," I said. "I have absolute faith in him."

As I spoke, the boughs of the cedar tree just behind rustled, and before Sir James could say another word, the gaunt figure of Pinheiro presented itself.

He stepped silently into our little circle, bowed to Sir James, nodded to me, then took the nearest chair.

"You look like a ghost, Pinheiro," said Sir James. "Did you come by the drive? I did not see you."

"I came through the shrubbery at the back of the house, Sir James," he answered.

I eyed him narrowly as he accepted a cup of tea which I poured out for him. He took it from my hand and leant back in his seat.

"You got my wire this morning, Sir James?" he asked, after a moment. "I would not trouble you on Sunday but for very special business—business that concerns us three personally, and Her Majesty's Government in particular."

As he spoke he gave a curious, automatic glance behind him, into the shadow of some laurel shrubs.

"I have come with news indeed," he continued; "and I will give it at once. Mademoiselle Delacourt is in England."

"What?" I cried.

"It is a fact, Phenays, and I must confess that I am, on the whole, glad. I think it is possible to weave a web round her now from which, with all her subtlety, she will not be able to escape. We do not know her whereabouts yet; neither is it known why she has been so mad as to set foot on the shores of the land where her greatest enemies are. I need not say that since I heard the news I have been busy, and I have now come here to tell you that, owing to certain inquiries, I have come to a fairly definite conclusion."

"What is that?" asked Sir James.

"In spite of all Mademoiselle's cleverness, she has been unable to keep from her employers, the Transvaal Secret Service agents, some of the recent performances of which you and I, Phenays, were the victims. And the affair with Monck has anything but redounded to her credit. Monck has given away one or two secrets which have further put Mademoiselle into hot water with her employers. Her object now in visiting England is to restore herself to their good favour, and she hopes to do this by a double *coup*."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She wants to secure a considerable sum of money, and she has another and more dangerous object."

"Our lives!" I said gloomily.

"Not only our lives, but the lives of others," was Pinheiro's terrible answer.

Sir James watched him narrowly.

"Can you give us your reasons for coming to these conclusions?" he asked after a pause.

"I can give you a very definite reason with regard to the money point."

Here he drew his chair closer to ours and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"When you were in Lisbon with me, Phenays, did you ever happen to hear of the revered crucifix of the Hermits of St. Augustine?"

"Never," I answered, wondering what on earth crucifixes had to do with Mademoiselle.

"It is a queer story in itself," continued Pinheiro, "and the fact of its in any way coming into our province is still queerer. First, let me give you the original history of the crucifix. The Church of Santo André, in Lisbon, belonged originally to the Hermits of St. Augustine. It was their own convent, and was founded in 1271. The convent was injured by an earthquake, and restored by the reformer of the Order, Friar Luiz de Montoya. The great earthquake of 1755 also injured it; but it was again rebuilt, and is now one of the largest temples in Lisbon. The Brotherhood of St. Augustine possess much gold plate, and jewels of great value; but their most treasured possession is—or, rather, was—a gold and silver crucifix, which was believed to have been given by the angels to Father Montoya. This crucifix was carried through the streets in procession every second Thursday in Lent, until, in a Jesuitical riot, seven years ago, it was stolen by someone unknown, and has never since been seen. An enormous reward, representing in English money about £16,000, was offered for its recovery by the Brotherhood of St. Augustine, who are very rich. But, great as the sum was, the crucifix was never restored. I was employed in the matter as detective. I did everything in my power, but failed utterly. My suspicion was that it had found its way to England. The real intrinsic value of the crucifix is small—not, perhaps, more than £40. Now, here is the extraordinary point where our threads join. I have just heard that the Brotherhood have received a letter asking if the reward for the crucifix is still open. This letter emanates from Mademoiselle Delacourt, and it is evident from its contents that her visit to England is for the purpose of securing the crucifix and obtaining the money. No doubt



"Give it to me and you shall have fifty pounds."

she will try to get the treasure by fraudulent means. Where it is hidden I do not yet know; but it is through this link that, I believe, our next great move will be played. By it I trust we shall run her down, and by doing so obtain information as to the gang, and possibly capture the papers relating to this great European conspiracy, and to her various plots in the Secret Service. The capture will, I know, be attended with difficulty and danger, and I want you, Phenays, to hold yourself in readiness to come to me, at a moment's notice, anywhere, if I wire to you. I am fully aware, Sir James," he added, "that this seems like taking a great liberty with you; but you will agree that in your own and the War Office's interests no pains must be spared to arrest this woman."

"I quite agree with you," replied the baronet with eagerness. "Do exactly as you think best, Pinheiro. If you succeed, you will deserve great recognition from the country. Though I have never seen the woman, her presence seems to haunt me."

"I know nothing, of course," continued Pinheiro, "but I feel that I ought to say you have every reason to fear her. I cannot impress upon you sufficiently the extreme necessity for caution. Blind malice and

revenge are parts of her nature. She may strike another blow. I hate to think I am alarming you unnecessarily; but I frankly tell you that we three are in danger, in personal danger, and there may be others—officials in power, I mean—in a similar plight."

There was no mistaking the Senhor's serious tone. As he spoke he took out his watch, looked at the hour, and sprang to his feet.

"I must be off again," he said. "Time is everything just now. You will be ready, Phenays?"

"Yes," was my answer.

He disappeared again through the thick shrubbery as quickly and silently as he had come.

"We live in queer times," said Sir James.

"I wish we were all well out of the coming week," was my answer.

"It behoves us to be watchful," said Sir James. "I can't say what a sense of relief I have in knowing that our affairs are in the hands of a man like Pinheiro."

The rest of the day passed quietly. The heat seemed to increase, towards evening the wind dropped utterly, but the banks of clouds had vanished from the horizon, and had

faded away into mist. The sky was cloudless. Sir James retired into his study, and I walked up and down with Evelyn.

"So Senhor Pinheiro was here to-day," she said suddenly.

"Yes," I answered. "But how did you know?"

"I saw him talking to you and father on the lawn. Has he brought any fresh news?"

I hesitated.

"Has he?" she continued, stamping her foot impatiently.

"What he told us was in confidence," was my answer.

"Yes," she said in a gentle tone, "but that confidence may surely be shared by me? Tell me at once what he came about. If you don't, I shall go and ask father."

"Mademoiselle is in England," I said then in a gloomy voice. "Pinheiro thinks we are in danger—it behoves us to be careful."

"Mr. Phenays, does that danger extend to my father?"

"Alas!"

"Oh, you have answered me. You need not say anything further." Her face turned very white. "There is no one I love as I do my father," she said then. "Personally I have no fear. Do you think that I could be afraid of a mere woman?"

"No," I interrupted: "but this woman is scarcely human. She is a fiend, not a woman. She would stop short at nothing. She uses as her weapon the most deadly scientific knowledge. It requires genius to follow her methods."

Evelyn was silent for a minute or two. Then she said—

"You know, I suppose, that to-morrow night nearly half the officials of the War Office are coming to dine here, and some half-dozen will spend the night at Warleigh Court? We are to have a dance after dinner—an impromptu affair, at which several of my friends are to be present."

"And what has that to say to Mademoiselle Delacourt?" I interrupted.

"I don't know. I feel very depressed about it. I wish we might postpone our guests."

"Oh, surely you are over nervous," I was

about to say. But then I remembered the ball—the famous masked ball at Lisbon—and was silent.

That night I slept badly, and towards morning was awakened by Tocsin, Sir James's big mastiff. The dog was barking furiously. I lay and listened, wondering whether I should get up and make investigations. As the animal ceased, however, before long, I dropped off into a doze.

In the morning I arose early. There were some lovely pinks in a bed at one side of the house. Now, pinks are my favourite flowers, and I went to pick a buttonhole. This special bed lay just along the south side of the house.



"He was bending over an open tin box."

I was somewhat startled, when I went up to the bed, to see that part of it looked as if it had been freshly dug, and one or two plants plucked by their roots were lying in a half-withered condition on the ground. I concluded that the gardener had been hoeing up weeds in the bed; but how carelessly he had done his work! I thought no more of the matter, but went to breakfast. There I was greeted with the information that Tocsin, the watch-dog, had been found dead just outside his kennel.

"Poisoned, of course," said Sir James in a very gloomy tone.

I looked at him—our eyes met. His conveyed a warning not to say anything to alarm Lady Noel. I remembered how the dog had barked the night before, and wished heartily that I had got up to look into the cause. Next moment the letter that lay on my plate absorbed all my attention. It was from Pinheiro, and ran as follows :—

“MY DEAR PHENAYS,

“Come up by the 10.30. I wish to see you at Baker Street. Important.

“Yours, P.”

I passed the letter over to Sir James. He made no comment at the time, but after breakfast he drew me into his study.

“That sounds good,” he said, “and of course you must go. The affair of the dog is a little suspicious, Phenays—you might mention it to Pinheiro when you see him. I do heartily hope that that dreadful woman will soon be arrested. We shall have no peace of mind while she is at large. It is a pity that you will be absent to-night, on account of the dinner and the dance afterwards ; but it cannot be helped.”

I felt very sorry myself at having to miss the big dinner, to which I had been looking forward for some time. Round Sir James's table that night would meet some of the keenest intellects in Europe. But Pinheiro's letter admitted of no postponement. I bade Sir James a hasty good-bye, little guessing under what strange circumstances I was destined to return to Warleigh Court.

The day which had just begun promised to be even hotter than the previous one. A dull sultriness hung in the air, and the papers prophesied a storm. When I reached Baker Street I saw Senhor Pinheiro waiting for me on the platform.

“Well !” I cried eagerly, “what is the news ?”

“I will tell you as we go along,” was his answer. “We are in for a big thing, and I want, if not your help, Phenays, at least your company. You may be required by and by as a witness—there is no saying. Whew ! this heat is dreadful ! We want a good storm to clear the air. And I expect we are in for one.” Here he smiled grimly.

When we got outside the station, Pinheiro hailed a hansom and told the man to drive to Westminster Abbey.

“We are going sight-seeing, Phenays,” he said, “but not to the Abbey. All the same, the Abbey is near enough so far as our cabman is concerned. We will dismiss him there and walk the rest of the way. Now

listen. I have come at the truth in regard to the whereabouts of the crucifix.”

“Impossible !” I could not help exclaiming.

“It is true,” he said, nodding his head ; “and when I tell you that I have no less than sixteen agents at work, day and night, in this cause, you must suppose that if success was possible, it was to be obtained. Success was possible, and we have won, so far as that discovery is concerned. Listen. The crucifix, for which such a great reward is offered, reposes now in a small curiosity shop full of rubbish, in a street near Victoria Station. It is still there, and is being watched night and day. It is in that shop we shall pick up the real secret of Mademoiselle's whereabouts, but how soon I cannot say.”

“Then you have not found out where she is hiding ?”

“No—but whenever that crucifix leaves the shop, it will be followed, and at the end of that line we shall find her. I greatly hope also that we shall be able to lay our hands on the papers which will give away her conspiracy and her gang. My great object in having you here is because there is a possibility that in the chase we may be separated. I must have another person to identify her, should anything happen to me.”

“What do you mean ?” I asked.

He shrugged his lean shoulders.

“My life will be cheap if I gain my end,” he answered.

He did not say any more until our cab set us down close to the Royal Aquarium. We walked quickly westwards. Presently we turned into a small, badly smelling alley, and I noticed, leaning against a lamp-post, a dissipated-looking waif, half in rags.

Pinheiro nodded to him.

“One of my men,” he whispered.

The next moment we had entered the tiny shop, in the windows of which was displayed a miscellaneous collection of cracked china, lustres, and old prints. Behind the counter stood a girl of about eighteen years of age, dressed in rusty black, and looking ill and nervous.

“What can I do for you, sir ?” she asked, as Pinheiro leaned against the counter.

“We have come to have a look at your things,” he replied in a kindly tone.

As he spoke he turned over some dowdy-looking paste buckles, and then began to examine massive chains in a cracked china dish. Finally he purchased some hideous white enamel buttons. While he was so engaged I observed that his keen eyes were

wandering over everything in the little shop. Up and down they looked, and from side to side. Suddenly he made a quick movement, stepped across the floor, and stretched out his hand. My heart beat fast, for I saw that he laid the tips of his thin white fingers upon a small gold and silver crucifix, dulled and tarnished with time.

"Ah! sir," cried the girl, "that is not for sale."

"Indeed!" he replied, taking it from the shelf and holding it in the palm of his hand.

He turned to me as he spoke, and held out the crucifix for me to examine.

My first sensation was one of surprise at its smallness. It was barely eight inches long, and the cross-piece but four inches. Was it possible that this tiny symbol of the Eternal Tragedy had such a strange history, and perhaps foreshadowed a stranger one?

"I have a fancy for this," said Pinheiro. "Why is it not for sale? I should like to buy it."

"It is already sold, sir."

"Indeed! I am sorry. I would give a good price for it."

The girl's eyes brightened and then grew dull again.

"And I want money very badly," she said after a pause; "but the lady is giving me a good price, too. She told me to put it away, and I put it on that back shelf. I didn't think anyone would notice it. She means to call for it this afternoon."

I could see the hand that held the crucifix tremble, in spite of its owner's *sang-froid*.

"How much are you going to get for it?" asked Pinheiro suddenly.

"Thirty pounds, sir; you will scarcely believe it."

"Give it to me and you shall have fifty pounds."

"Oh! sir, I must not go back on my bargain. I wish you had seen it yesterday; but the lady was very anxious, and she is kind. I would not do anything shabby about it, sir, on any account."

Pinheiro gave her back the crucifix.

"Take it, my dear," he said. "You are a good girl, and I won't tempt you."

"I am very poor, and alone in the world," said the girl slowly. "My father had this crucifix for some time. He got it in a strange way. Some men slept here six or seven years ago. They were Portuguese, and my mother was a Portuguese, so my father was good to them. In the morning one of these men gave father the crucifix to keep. 'Keep it safely,' he said, 'and I will

call again for it. Don't show it to anyone. It is of great value, greater than you have the least idea of.' But what do you think, sir? Father waited day after day and week after week for the man to return to claim the crucifix; but he never came back, and, at last, one day we saw an account of his death in one of the papers. He had been killed in a street row. So from that day father considered that the crucifix was his; but he never seemed inclined to sell it. He said the man might have left relations who would claim it. They did not, and on his deathbed father told me that I might consider it mine. 'It is of value,' he said. 'Don't sell it unless you can help it.'"

"And you have sold it at last," said Pinheiro. "Why is that?"

"Because I'm dreadfully poor. Things have been going from bad to worse in my little shop, and my landlord means to sell me up for the rent, which has been owing now for two quarters."

A gleam of pure pleasure came into Pinheiro's eyes; his whole face seemed to alter and become soft and human. I had never seen him look the least like this before.

"You will hear from me again," he said, emphasis in his voice. "But before we go now, may I ask you one more question? You speak of a kind lady who has bought this crucifix. Why did she not take it away with her?"

"Because she hadn't got enough money. She wanted me to trust her, and I would have, for she looked so very kind; but father made me promise that I would never on any account do that sort of thing. She said she would bring the money to-day. May I put it back now in its place, please, sir?"

"Do," said Pinheiro. "When did you say the lady would call?"

"Some time late this afternoon."

Pinheiro picked up his little parcel of buttons, then he suddenly held out his hand.

"You have Portuguese blood," he said to the girl, "and, therefore, I claim you as—as a sister in a strange land. Perhaps I will come again, and perhaps when I do I shall bring you more luck than you think."

When we got into the street he turned to me.

"Fortune is favouring us," he said. "The fact of Mademoiselle wanting money is certainly on our side. Had she had the money about her last night, our quest would have been in vain. But it has been a near

thing. What a surprise is in store for the pretty little girl in the shop! It is really quite a romance. Sixteen thousand pounds will set her up for life. If I can secure the crucifix, I shall take good care that *La Petite* gets her reward."

"Then you really mean to let Mademoiselle take the crucifix?"

"It is the only means of tracing her to

her den, so it is necessary. You will see some tracking worth looking at to-night, Phenays. She shan't escape me this time. Jove! the heat gets worse and worse. Let's come into this restaurant and have some lunch."

I was far too excited to eat anything, and while Pinheiro refreshed himself I paced up and down outside. We had strolled as far

as Westminster, and we went for a time into the Abbey, where it was both still and cool.

As the evening approached we went back to continue our watch. Dusk arrived and the heat grew yet greater. Not a breath of wind stirred. There was not a sign of Mademoiselle.

"She is certain to come soon," Pinheiro once or twice remarked to me.

"But won't she see us if we stand here?" I asked.

"Not before I know that she is coming. This street is all eyes, although you can't see them. I have been talking for the last half hour with my men. Dear, dear! Don't you know the walking-stick language of detectives? We use it in all big capitals, and here——"

He stopped short, seized my arm, and we withdrew into the shadow of an open door.

"She is coming!" he whispered.



"Presently he shouted down the trap in staccato accents."

The entrance to the little shop was quite hidden from us, but he was reading off the signs from a man standing about fifty yards away.

"Now," he said, as a private hansom, with silent tyres and no bells, shot up, "in with you!"

Darkness had fallen, and all the lamps were lit as we sped down Victoria Street. It was past nine o'clock.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I don't know. Don't talk to me, please," he said curtly.

It was a weird drive. Away and away we went through endless streets; northwards, ever northwards did our cab take us. I had no idea what part of London we were going to. I only knew it was as strange a quest as I had ever been on. The heat increased, and a low growl of thunder showed us that the storm was approaching. Even the elements seemed uneasy.

We must have been going for more than an hour, when I suddenly perceived that we had approached the borders of a great common. There were no houses or lights visible; but we were driving rapidly beneath a belt of dark trees which edged the common.

All of a sudden the cab drew up at a little gate that barred the entrance to a narrow walk. The darkness was now so intense that I could not see three feet before my face.

A voice spoke in quick tones beside us. From where did it spring? Pinheiro answered in a whisper. The gate was opened—there was a sudden rush in the darkness, followed by a shout. Pinheiro had vanished.

I leapt from the cab and rushed after Pinheiro through the gate. The next instant I was hurled back by someone unseen. A voice exclaimed in a foreign tongue. There were two sharp reports of a pistol somewhere at a little distance in the darkness, then all was still.

A moment later Pinheiro himself caught my arm and led me up the path into a small house. The door of the house was open, and there was a light in the room to the left.

In this room sat a man whom I immediately recognised as Inspector Scott. He was holding a candle in his hand and was bending over an open tin box.

Perspiration streamed from Pinheiro's face. He began to swear softly in Portuguese.

"A big haul, and smartly done, sir," said the inspector. "The papers are here, but the rats are gone. It was a near thing."

"They won't get far," said Pinheiro, "and

it is worth losing the gang to secure the papers, and also this—look, Phenays." As he spoke he held a little gold and silver crucifix between himself and the light. The next instant he took off his hat and handed it to me. There was a hole clean through the crown.

I shuddered.

"For Heaven's sake! explain these things," I said. "Where are we, and what has happened? How can you talk of having managed things neatly, when Mademoiselle has escaped?"

"We have made a success, and a great one, although, had we secured Mademoiselle, it would have been perfect," said Pinheiro. "Our success in this instance is altogether due to our cabdriver, Inspector Scott, who has the eyes of a cat. You don't seem to realise that we are now in possession of the headquarters of the enemy. We have recovered the crucifix, and here lie papers of the most profound importance to the British Government. This house is on the outskirts of Hampstead Heath. We will just go cursorily through the papers, Scott, before we remove them for closer examination."

The inspector renewed his search in the tin box.

"How did you get the crucifix?" I asked Pinheiro.

"She had it in her hand when she bolted. I snatched it in the dark, and she returned the compliment by perforating my hat."

"But why didn't you follow her?"

"Her time is close at hand. These papers are much more important. If we had continued to chase her and her followers in the dark, all over Hampstead Heath, one of them would have returned to destroy everything. Better let her go for the time. Here lie our proofs. She cannot do much more mischief now."

"Well," I answered, "the temptation to follow her would have been beyond my power to resist."

"Exactly, and it would have been just what she would have wished us to do. I am glad I secured the crucifix, though, for the sake of our little friend in the curiosity shop."

Inspector Scott now began to make a systematic search of the room, and Pinheiro seated himself by a deal table to examine the papers. A glance showed me that the house was a very small one, and the room in which we found ourselves was badly furnished.

"So this is what the woman has come to, who consorted with princes and was known



"He swung the axe round."

to most of the crowned heads of Europe," I said to myself. "Pinheiro is right. One of her objects in coming to England is to make money."

"Are these papers of value?" I asked Pinheiro presently, for a constant succession of exclamations of astonishment were bursting from his lips as he turned them over.

"Yes," he answered. "We have matter enough here to destroy one of the cleverest combinations in Europe. Mademoiselle's own capture will only be a matter of days."

He continued to read, opening letter after letter, turning page after page. I stood idly by. The room was only lit by a couple of candles, but outside the lightning played continually. The thunder rattled louder and nearer—the storm was coming up quickly. The scene in the small room was, to all appearances, peaceful; but in a moment everything was changed.

Pinheiro had taken out his tobacco-pouch and was rolling a cigarette. His eyes were still fixed on the papers which he was reading. Suddenly I saw a line deepen round his eyes, and the white fingers ceased to roll the cigarette paper. The next instant, with a bound, he leapt to his feet and was pushing me from the room.

Never had I seen fear written so terribly on man's face before. Gaunt and forbidding always, it was now that of a satyr.

As we both left the room he shouted back over his shoulder—

"Read that letter, Scott! Secure all the papers. In with you, Phenays!"

He pushed me into the cab and sprang himself on to the box. We were off at a gallop into the night. Presently he shouted down the trap in staccato accents:

"We're going to Warleigh Court to cut the lightning conductor. There's half a hundredweight of explosive at the end of it. The storm

is on us. What fools you must have been to notice nothing! I warned you. Was there ever such a scheme? It is a hundred to one that we're too late. It is a race with the storm. Who is stopping there to-night?"

"Half the War Office officials are dining there, and many of them stopping, and they are to have a dance after dinner," I shouted back. "Do you know your way?"

"Yes," he answered. "We shall be there before any wire could reach them. Sit tight."

Amidst the clatter of the horse's hoofs my memory came back to me. The bark of the mastiff last night, the disarranging of the bed of pinks, the death of the dog. Yes, I recalled everything, and the pinks were disturbed just where the lightning conductor entered the ground. I could have screamed aloud. Just then a brighter flash cleft the darkness, and the thunder crashed immediately after it. Rain began to fall in torrents.

At last the cab swerved through the gates, and a moment later we were there.

Once more Pinheiro shouted to me.

"Get an axe you know the way better than I do."

I sprang out. A girl was standing under the deep porch. She saw me and flew down the steps. It was Evelyn.

"What is wrong?" she said.

"Help me to get an axe. Don't lose a moment," I panted.

She seemed to understand. Not another word passed her lips. She flew in the direction of the gardener's shed, right across the lawn. I went after her. The rain was like a water-spout, and the darkness black as pitch.

"This way," I said. I led her to the side of the house, where the lightning conductor went into the ground.

Pinheiro was already there.

"Here is the conductor," I said - "feel."

The wall of the house was close by. I gave him the axe.

"Stand out of the way, Miss Noel," he said.

He swung the axe round, it crashed against the wall, and I then saw him tearing with his hands like a maniac, as a blinding flash lit the sky.

"In time!" he cried, and he seized Evelyn

by both her hands. "Phenays, take the cab to the stable. Take me to your father, Miss Evelyn. What a wet night!"

The sound of music filled the house. Through a half-opened door we could see the gay dancers as they waltzed round and round. Evelyn took us to the library. There Sir James, Pinheiro, Evelyn, and I met. The clock pointed to 11.15.

"Miss Evelyn, you have pluck enough to listen," said Pinheiro. "I have met you under difficult circumstances before now. This, Sir James, is the new development."

He then rapidly recounted the details of our day's adventure.

"If you will allow me, I should like to examine the flower-bed at once," said Pinheiro, when his story had come to an end; "but we shall want a lantern and a spade."

A very short investigation resulted in our finding a metal box of nitro-glycerine buried barely a foot below the bed. To this case was connected the lower end of the conductor.

Having made our examination, which we did silently, we returned to the house.

"It was a matter of seconds, Sir James," remarked Pinheiro, as he drained off a long brandy-and-soda. "The fact is, I expected to find Warleigh Court in the next county when I arrived. There was enough nitro-glycerine to do it, too."

How any man could jest at such a time seemed incredible, but Pinheiro was not human. Just at that moment, however, a wonderfully soft expression came into his eyes. He turned to me and said in a whisper -

"How happy our little friend in the curiosity shop will be to-morrow!"



W. Edward Weatfull / 1919



THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.*

NO. VI.—THE LOST SQUARE.

JUST about this time I lost a considerable sum of money, and from being a man with abundant means I became a comparatively poor one. This misfortune was doubtless a blessing in disguise, for it aroused me from concentrating all my thoughts on my own miserable condition. In the future I must work hard to live and must no longer play with work. My post as secretary to Sir James Noel was no longer, for many reasons, to my taste. I liked Sir James, but both he and I agreed that he would do better with a secretary who was less hampered—in short, a total stranger, who knew nothing about either Mademoiselle or Senhor Pinheiro, would be more to his purpose. I accordingly left him and took lodgings in an unfashionable part of Kensington.

Pinheiro returned to Lisbon, to his work there, and Mademoiselle was, to all appearance, lost to us both. We concluded that she must, in some marvellous way, have contrived to escape from England, and I sincerely hoped that I should never be troubled by her again.

Hard and honest and unceasing work brought back my lost nerve. I was no longer harrowed by the terror of secret assassination. As a poor man I was delightfully unimportant, and I turned all my attention and all my thoughts to the one thing for which I had a special talent. We most of us possess one ability to a sufficient degree to make a living by means of it if necessary, and my talent was an extraordinary one. I could, from my very earliest years, solve almost any acrostic or enigma that was put before me. Even as a child I remember giving the solutions to all the acrostics which appeared in the magazines, and also making quite a nice income by securing the prizes which were offered for the right answers.

Six months, therefore, after I had lost my money and resigned my post as Sir James Noel's secretary, I became one of the constructors of codes and ciphers for the Government, and also received employment from several large commercial firms. I was busy and well paid. My life was practically a new one. I resolved to live it with enthusiasm and contentment, and, if possible, to forget the past.

But alas! the past in cases like mine is seldom really forgotten and seldom safely buried. I was once again to be subjected to the cruel machinations of a deadly foe.

On a certain evening in January, I was just finishing my early tea, when a servant entered the room to say that a foreign gentleman had called and wished to see me at once. Wondering who my visitor was, I told the man to show him in, and rose from the tea-table to receive him.

The next moment there entered a short, but well-built man, of a swarthy complexion. He made a low bow when he saw me, and held his silk hat in his hand.

"I must ask your pardon, Senhor Phenays, for calling upon you at this hour; but my business happens to be of great importance. I bring you a letter from Senhor José da Fondeca Pinheiro. He asked me to call upon you as soon as ever I got to town."

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"I covered several sheets of paper with my figures."

The man spoke perfect English, but with a marked foreign pronunciation, and with a curious movement of the lips.

"Indeed," I answered, with eagerness, "I shall always be pleased to welcome any friend of Pinheiro's. Have you the letter with you?"

"Yes, senhor, here it is."

He handed me a letter written in the well known characters of my friend. It ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR PHENAYS,—The bearer, Senhor da Costa, a native of Lisbon and a friend of mine, has just been to see me in connection with a document and diagram which he believes to be of great value. I have translated the old Portuguese for him, and it refers to the diagram. Both document and diagram are of undoubted antiquity, and seem to be a sort of old cipher or puzzle. I know

nothing about such matters, and it occurred to me that, as this is very much in your line, I would send him to you. Even if you cannot do anything with the diagram, you will be entitled to charge a fee for your trouble. In the old Portuguese writing occur the words 'Casa dos diamantes,' which literally means 'The house of diamonds.' Da Costa

has told me, however, that the expression has nothing to do with diamonds, for the stonemasons in Portugal call a stone cut into a four-sided pyramid 'diamante.' I find on inquiry that this is the case. If you can do anything to help Da Costa, you will oblige me. Trusting you are well, my dear Phenays,

"Believe me, yours sincerely,

"JOSE DA FONDECA PINHEIRO."

"I shall be willing to do all in my power to help you, Senhor da Costa," I said, "but I fear the foreign cipher will be outside my range of observation."

"I sincerely hope not, senhor. Senhor Pinheiro asked me to come to you, as the best man for the purpose in the whole of London."

"Let me see your diagram," was my answer to this.

"I have not got it with me," he replied. "And, before I subject it to your examination, I must ask you to swear that, if you succeed in deciphering it, you will not divulge the solution to a single soul. I believe it to be of extreme importance, and it is only because I cannot solve it myself that I am bound to run the risk of entrusting it to the confidence of a stranger."

"Your secret shall be respected by me," I answered, "provided, of course, that it is a harmless one."

"It is absolutely harmless, Mr. Phenays."

"Where am I to see the cipher?"

"In my rooms. I have apartments in a house in Bloomsbury. Can you come now?"

"Certainly."

"Come along, then. My cab is at the door; we shall be there in less than half an hour."

He spoke little as we drove along, and presently the cab stopped at one of the large old houses in a street leading out of Bloomsbury Square.

Senhor da Costa paid the driver and opened the door with a latch-key. He ushered me into a dimly lit and dingy hall, the floor of which was bare of mat or carpet. The staircase was also bare, and sloped up in naked ugliness into the darkness above. Our footsteps rang loud on the uncarpeted stairs. When we reached the first floor, Da Costa threw open the door of a big room.

"Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Phenays," he said. "I will fetch the document and join you."

As soon as I was alone I glanced round the room. It was badly and scantily furnished. A faded carpet covered the floor, and cheap prints hung upon the walls. The only light was from a kerosene lamp which stood on the table in the middle of the room. This lamp smelt horribly and added to the sense of depression which stole over me. A thousand unanswered questions floated through my brain. Who was Da Costa, and what was this mysterious cipher? What was this mystery of mysteries which I was asked to unravel? Had it not been for Pinheiro's letter, I should have had nothing whatever to do with the Portuguese. But Pinheiro had said that he was a friend of his, and had asked me to help him. I had no doubt for a moment of the genuineness of the letter which had been handed to me, as coming from my friend. The handwriting was the same, the heading to the paper that which I so well remembered. Yes, I need not be alarmed. Pinheiro was the last man on earth to lead me into a dangerous or unworthy adventure.

Da Costa came briskly in, produced an old tin box, and proceeded to open it. From the box he drew a parchment, yellow and stained with age. This he unfolded and carefully smoothed out. I bent over it with much curiosity. Upon it, in the form of a square, was some faded manuscript, of which not a single word was legible to me. The writing was enclosed in a number of dots or points. These points were joined by connecting lines, forming small squares. In some cases, however, the lines were missing, giving an irregular appearance to the whole;

but whether this was owing to age having erased them, or to the whim of the original designer, it was impossible to say.

"Now," said Da Costa, "I will read the translation of the writing by Senhor Pinheiro. He assures me that it is quite literal and true. Listen!" He read aloud in a sonorous voice:—

"They say that I am mad—that my wealth has made me mad. I am prevented thus from following the desire of my heart. You, my dearest friend, whom I love, shall receive all. I am dying, yet I fear to write where they are, lest this paper should fall into the hands of strangers and those who hate me. Therefore, I show here how you may receive all. You remember our secret studies. You, and you alone, can read this map, so it is thus safe. They lie at the sixty-fifth square of the House of Pyramids. Your beloved friend. Pray for my soul."

"This is very interesting," I said. "It sounds like some letter or dying instructions to the person addressed."

"Oh! it strikes you like that, does it?" he answered. "Kindly say what you think of the cipher, and if you see any possibility of the solution."

I examined it very carefully, and then, asking for a pair of compasses and some paper, I systematically set to work to apply to the diagram every process that I knew relating to such class of enigma, both diagrammatical and mathematical. I covered several sheets of paper with my figures. The Portuguese watched my every movement with almost embarrassing attention. I could arrive at no result, and at the end of an hour I leant back in my chair and had to confess that for the present I was baffled.

"Am I at liberty to inquire how the document came into your possession?" I asked.

"You are not," was his short reply.

"I mean this," I said hotly, for his manner began to irritate me. "You ask me here to solve what is an extremely abstruse conundrum, and which, for all I know, may have no solution. I cannot tell whether you are hiding anything from me that would help me to a solution. It may be necessary for your purpose to do this; if so, and if you cannot give me any further help, I am afraid I shall never succeed in discovering this mysterious sixty-fifth square, for this is evidently the key to the problem."

"Then you think it is insoluble?"

"I do not say that at all; there are very

few ciphers which the ingenuity of man has constructed that the ingenuity of man, in time, cannot solve, provided, of course, that there is a solution."

"You have solved a good many in your life, Mr. Phenays, I take it?"

"Yes," I replied. "I have, and constructed a good many, too."

"Suppose you saw the real thing—say the surface of the building or the room to which this might apply—would you have a better chance?"

"Very much better. Indeed, I think I might almost guarantee to discover the solution; but I should not like to swear."

He sat biting his fingers, regarding me fixedly for a few minutes.

"Are you a busy man, Mr. Phenays?" he asked at last.

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"I mean, could you get away for about a week now?"

"No, that would be impossible," I said, remembering my work.

"But if I make it worth your while?"

I looked at him in astonishment.

"I am afraid I don't understand you. *Senhor da Costa*," was my answer. "And I must confess that the whole of to-night's business is extremely mysterious to me. I don't know if *Senhor Pinheiro* told you that I am a man with a great deal of business to transact. I am employed, not only by several firms, but also by the Government, on matters of great importance. Were I to throw up my present employment, I should lose a position which it is essential to me to retain. To put it shortly, I should lose my livelihood."

"Will an absence of a week mean this?" he asked.

"It would be very inconvenient to leave home at present," was my reply.

"Then may I ask what sum would make it convenient?"

I did not answer for a moment. I was short of funds, and a debt, which, owing to my recent losses, I had been unable to meet, loomed unpleasantly on the horizon. The present opportunity was, therefore, not to be despised.

"*Senhor Pinheiro* mentioned that you were the sort of man to give valuable assistance in an emergency like this," said the Portuguese, speaking slowly and with many pauses. "He was much interested in this matter. You may help him by coming to our aid. Will you do it?"

"I should require the sum of eight

hundred pounds," I said at last. "If you will agree to this, and if you will let me have the money down before I leave England, I shall be at your service."

A long silence followed my words. My strange companion regarded me fixedly. The cheap ormolu clock on the mantelpiece ticked away incessantly—that was the only sound in the room.

"Suppose I were to consent to give you that sum, Mr. Phenays," he said at last, "what guarantee will you give me that you will not at the last moment cry off and desert me?"

"I will give you the word of an English gentleman," I answered; "and I only make one reservation. If I find, in what I am about to do, anything underhand, or criminal, or against the laws of my own country, I return to England at once."

He gave a short laugh. "Pooh! You Englishmen are all alike—always suspicious. But would you not be content to receive the money at the conclusion of the business?"

"No, I shall require it in Bank of England notes before I go."

Again there was silence.

"I cannot do that," he said at last, slowly. "I have not so much money with me. You must consider my position, and the risk I am running. Your solution may, after all, be incorrect; and if correct, it may lead to nothing. Come, I will make you a fair offer. I will hand you three hundred pounds before we start."

"Where do we go?" I asked.

"To Lisbon."

"Then I shall see *Pinheiro* again?" I said.

"You will. Your friend will be waiting to receive you. You see for yourself that you are very largely paid for a matter which is not dangerous to you, and does not occupy many days of your time."

"Very well," I answered; "I will go with you. I will be satisfied to receive three hundred pounds in advance, and the remaining five hundred pounds on the completion of this business. That is," I added, "provided your explanation of this affair is satisfactory to me."

"Is that also an indispensable condition?" he asked.

"I do not agree without it," I replied.

"Then I will tell you. Give me your hand and word of honour."

I held out my hand. "You have already had my word," I said; "an Englishman does not repeat himself."

"Very well," he said. "Now listen." He bent eagerly forward, his swarthy face was flushed, and his eyes glistened. "Do you know Lisbon?"

"Yes," I said.

He looked startled for a moment, then he said slowly, "I forgot; you are a friend of Pinheiro's. Lisbon is that great detective's headquarters. Knowing our city, you will understand the better the description I am going to give you."

He bent forward, lowering his voice and fixing his somewhat prominent black eyes on my face.

"In Lisbon," said Da Costa, "there is a certain house. It is the oldest in the city, and is called the Casa dos Bicos. It was built about 1490 by a very rich and eccentric man—indeed, there is little doubt that he was mad. Now, 'Bico' in Portuguese means a point, and it derives its name from the fact that the front is bristling with quadrangular pyramids of stone, each terminating in a point. Upon each point, and there are over seven hundred, this man intended to set a diamond. But the work was stopped by the Government, as there would then have been a richer house in Lisbon than the Royal Palace. Lisbon was at that time a great commercial emporium, full of wealthy merchants, living in great luxury, excess, and extravagance. The man in question was one of these. The house had withstood no less than six great earthquakes. The great one of 1531, which lasted for fifty days; four more earthquakes in that terrible century; and, finally, the greatest of all in 1755, which destroyed half the city. The strange story of the diamond craze had been little credited, and was, indeed, almost forgotten, when this document was discovered by Senhora Lello Mendez, the present owner, and the direct descendant of the builder of the house. It is on her behalf I am now employed. There are documents and receipts proving conclusively that this man had in the house over seven hundred Brazilian diamonds of the finest water, and when he died, their whereabouts could never be traced. I believe this paper to be the key. With your aid we might read the cipher contained therein, and if so—if—" his voice trembled audibly—"the Senhora Lello Mendez will be the richest woman in Europe, and—I know her well—she will not forget us."

I gave a gasp as he ceased speaking.

"Your story astonishes me, Senhor da

Costa," I said. "Supposing the diamonds are found, what do you reckon their value will be?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Anything you like. I don't suppose less than half a million sterling."

"And where is this lady now?"

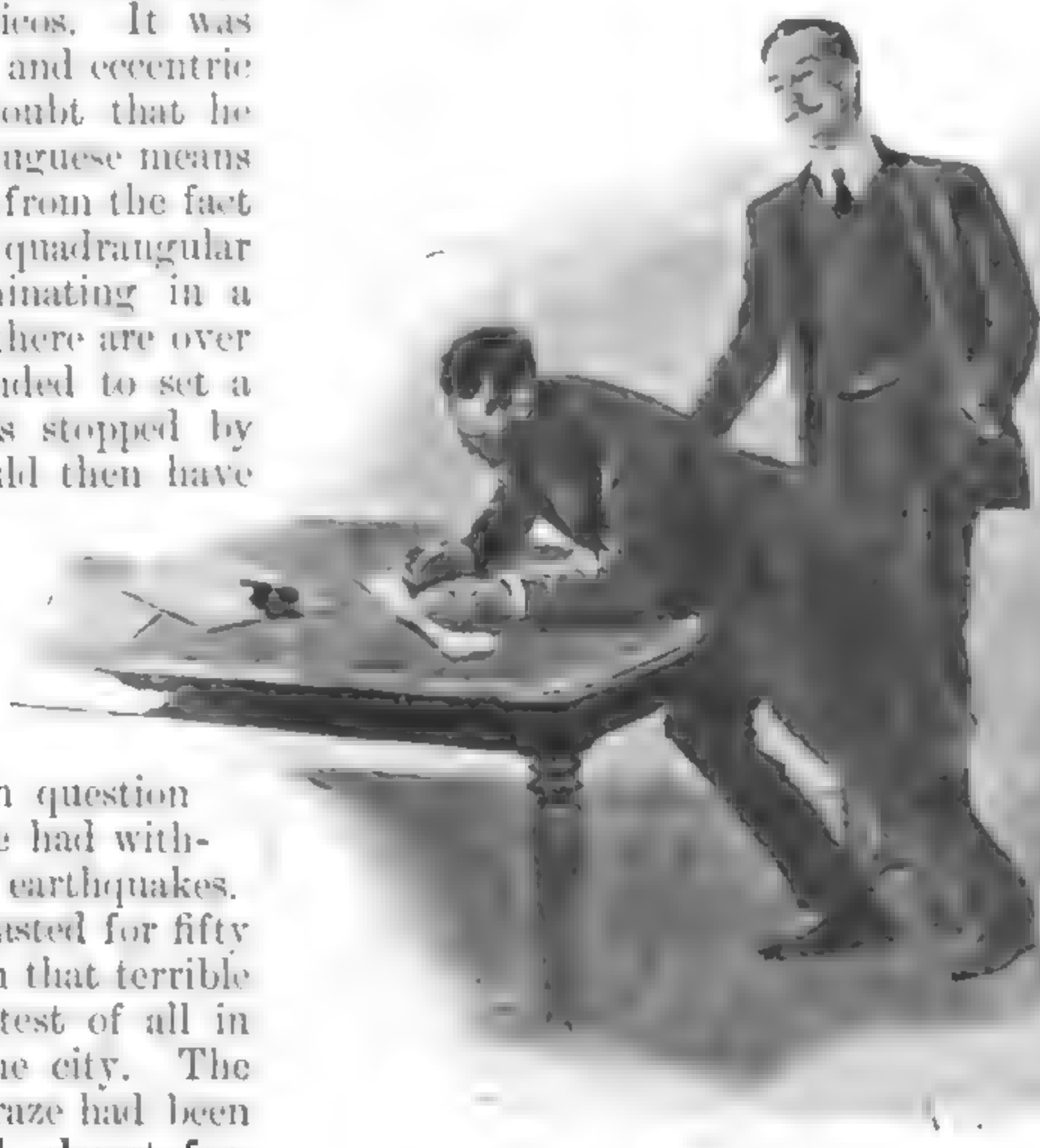
"In Lisbon."

"Does Senhor Pinheiro know her?"

"Very well indeed. In fact, he is working in this matter in her behalf."

"Really?"

I had a passing moment of wonder that my friend had not written straight to me through the post.



"He filled in a cheque for the required amount."

Da Costa seemed to read my thoughts.

"I saw Pinheiro just before I started," he said. "I travelled day and night. The mail could not come quicker. When he spoke of you, I recognised at once that you were the very man for our purpose, raised up, so to speak, by Providence. What Pinheiro suggests, we, his followers, always act upon. Oh! he is a great man, sir—a wonderful man—the greatest detective of his time."

I sank back in my chair. My heart was beating fast. I had in very truth recovered my nerve, and was in the mood for adventures. I needed money, and here was

a way of getting it. I longed to see my friend again. That wish could also be gratified. In a moment I rose from my seat and told the Portuguese that, provided he would hand me a cheque for three hundred pounds, I should be ready to start on my journey at eleven o'clock on the following morning.

He jumped up in extraordinary excitement, produced a cheque-book, filled in a cheque for the required amount, and handed it to me. I saw that it was payable at the City Bank, shook hands with him, and went away.

I spent a busy night, arranging a hundred details and writing many letters; finally, as soon as the bank was opened, I took my cheque there and received in exchange six crisp Bank of England notes for fifty pounds each. I lodged five of the notes to my private account at my own bank, and changed the remaining one for gold and five-pound Bank of England notes. At half past ten I drove up to the house in Bloomsbury.

Da Costa was waiting on the steps to receive me. His luggage was already on the roof of a cab.

"Come," he said, uneasiness in his tone, "we have not a moment to lose. We shall just catch the express to Paris."

I jumped into the cab, and the Portuguese followed me. The door was slammed, and we were off.

The journey itself was uneventful. We left Paris by the Sud-Express, and passing through Bordeaux and Villar Formosa on the Portuguese frontier, rumbled into Rocio Station at Lisbon, at 11.30 on Saturday night. Just as we were doing so I turned to the Portuguese.

"I shall take a cab," I said, "and drive straight to Senhor Pinheiro's house."

He had been sullen, not to say morose, during our journey. Now he was all alive and evidently full of great excitement.

"No, my friend," he said. "Your time is mine. You come with me, straight with me, to business—now, now. We meet Pinheiro at the house where your services are required. We waste no time going to his palace in the suburbs."

As I had no answer to make to this, and no possible objection to offer, I followed the Portuguese out of the station. He almost pushed me into a pair-horse vehicle, followed himself, and, without waiting for any luggage except my small handbag, desired the driver to hurry forward.

We immediately dashed off at a great pace, rattling and bumping over the cobble-stones. We went down queer, narrow, low-built streets full of strange sights and sounds. Again we went up inclines so steep that the



"He drew me into the shadow of a dark archway."

windows were right above us, then down slopes on which, had the brake given way, we must have gone to instant destruction.

At last we stopped at a small house in a deserted lane. My companion paid the driver, opened the door with a latch-key, and bade me bring my bag inside.

We entered a room on the ground floor. The house appeared to be quite deserted and was absolutely quiet.

"Now," said Da Costa, speaking with great eagerness, "we must make haste. We have delayed too long already, and time is short, very short. There are others after the treasure. They want to rob the rightful owner. Get what you want quickly."

I opened my bag, took out my measuring-tape, foot-rule, and designing-case, and announced that I was ready. When we got outside the house I paused.

"Did you really say that Pinheiro would meet us at the house to which we are going?" I asked.

"Certainly; he knows of our arrival. He is only too anxious to see you. Come, come! We lose everything by this delay."

We started forward at a smart pace. Although I supposed myself to know Lisbon fairly well, I had not the slightest notion in what direction we were going. Twice Da Costa halted and glanced behind him, and once, seizing my arm, he drew me into the shadow of a dark archway. There we waited for a few moments and then resumed our journey. My distrust of the man and of the whole expedition grew at every step, and had he not been very much stronger than I, I should have refused to go on. I determined, however, to keep my reason and all my wits in active play, and I did not allow anything to escape my attention. I observed that we trended our way, for the most part, downhill, till at length, after innumerable turnings and twistings, I saw lying before me the broad expanse of the Tagus, dotted with the twinkling lights of the crowded shipping. A few moments more and we were down on the riverside, threading our way among the wharves, alongside of which were moored innumerable craft, their masts and spars sticking up in fantastic criss-cross designs. Though it was now past midnight, the quay was alive with noise and bustle, and was thronged with foreign sailors, who were loading an outward-bound steamer. Still, on we went, past great, gaunt factories which shut out half the sky, and tall chimneys that loomed black against the stars. Now through dark and squalid streets, redolent of foul

odours. From the lighted interiors of the wineshops came shouts of coarse laughter and brawling. From the time we started, my companion had not spoken a single word, and when he suddenly halted before the most extraordinary looking house I had ever seen, and said, "Now, Mr. Phenays," I started as if a cannon report had gone off in my ear. The house was very low and wedged in between taller ones on either side. The entire front was, as Da Costa had described it, bristling with pointed stones set in regular rows.

Upon a door under a low archway Da Costa now gave one or two peculiar knocks; it was immediately opened by a man dressed only in a shirt and trousers, with a queer sort of stocking-cap on his head.

As soon as we were inside he closed and bolted the door and then lit a lantern. A few words of conversation, in very low tones, passed between him and Da Costa, of which I was evidently the subject.

Meanwhile I looked around me. We were in a long, low room, with a stone floor covered with mats. The ceiling was supported by thick wooden joists. There was nothing whatever in this room but some barrels, a pair of large weighing-scales, and piles of split and dried codfish, which smelt horribly.

Motioning me to follow them, the two men went down some steps to a tiny room containing a small table and three wooden chairs. The floor and walls were of square stones.

Holding up the lantern, Da Costa turned to me and said, "I had hoped to find Pinheiro here, but he has not come. We cannot wait for him. Now, Mr. Phenays, this is the room. Start your work at once. What do you think of it? Here is the cipher."

As he spoke he handed me the parchment.

I was on my mettle now, and flung the whole of my mental energy into the problem before me. I forgot Pinheiro. I forgot everything but my own work. First I measured the walls. They were exactly eight feet each way. Then I found the area of the floor, but where the sixty-fifth square could be it was impossible to conceive. Was this a mere juggling of words, or had it a latent and very obvious meaning?

On my way from London I had been puzzling over it, and somewhere at the back of my brain had been moving an old memory of a sixty-fifth square; but when, where, and how I had heard about it, I had not been able to recall.

Now, suddenly, as if in a flash, the possible solution burst upon me. Was it—could it be—based upon the classic conundrum of The Lost Square?

My fingers trembled as I took up my compass and measured the place. The thing was evident, it must be that.

"What are you doing?" cried Da Costa suddenly. Both men had noticed my excitement.

"I think I have got it," I answered.

"What?" he exclaimed, grasping my arm. "How—what—where is it?"

"It is here, and yet it is not here," was my ambiguous answer.

"The square?"

"Yes, the square."

"You can find it?"

"I think so; let me alone for a minute."

The two men sprang to their feet, both in such a state of excitement that I felt really alarmed. They seemed perfectly frenzied. They strode to and fro, uttering low, nasal Portuguese expletives, and casting glances at me with wild, staring eyes.

"I mean this," I said. "My opinion is that this cipher is founded on a very old classical conundrum, called The Lost Square, and I will show you how."

In a few minutes I had cut out a square of paper, measuring eight inches by eight inches, and I had shown the men that when cut in a certain way it would be made into a parallelogram thirteen inches by five inches, *apparently* containing sixty-five squares. But the fallacy lay in the fact that the latter figure was not full, but that the spaces between the pieces made up the missing square.

"But, then, where is it?" burst from Da Costa's lips.

I pushed back the table and fell on my knees. If there were a sixty-fifth square, it must mean that the floor was not level, for to contain an extra square a surface must be raised at some point. I passed the lantern over the floor and in a moment found some of the square stones perceptibly raised.

"I should say it was here," I said, with a bold plunge.

With no word of eulogy for my skill, they fell to work upon the stones with pick and crowbar, and I remember as they did so a very disturbing thought flashed across me. It was this. Why on earth, if the lady owned this house, should she want to have all this done, when, if there were the slightest chance of such treasure being hidden within its walls, it would be worth her while to pull the whole house down to find it?

But these thoughts were instantly dispelled by the fact that I had evidently read the cipher aright. The men talked in Portuguese, and it irritated my already overstrung nerves not to be able to understand a word they said.

The removal of four stones discovered the entrance to a low passage. Da Costa grasped my hand.

"Come along," he said, his voice choking with excitement, which almost amounted to madness. "You and I will go first. We owe you—oh! what do we not owe you, Mr. Phenays? When Senhora Lello Mendez knows what you have done, her gratitude will be unbounded, and she is one of those who never forgets. Ah! here she comes."

The rustling of a silk dress was heard along the passage. The door of the small room was flung wide, and the stately figure of Mademoiselle Delacourt herself appeared on the threshold.

The horror which surged up in my heart prevented my uttering a word; outwardly I was stunned, within my pulses beat madly. I knew at once that I was the victim of a fresh conspiracy, and that of the most dangerous type to which I had yet been subjected.

Mademoiselle wore a loose robe of black silk, which covered her from head to foot. On her head she had no covering beyond her light and beautiful hair.

I backed slowly against the wall. She entered a foot or two, and her eyes met mine.

"Have you got the clue to the treasure—the key to the conundrum?" she asked. "Know that I am Senhora Lello Mendez, and that the treasure within this house belongs to me. For years, for centuries, it has been lost. Have you, my enemy, found it for me—the greatest treasure in Lisbon?"

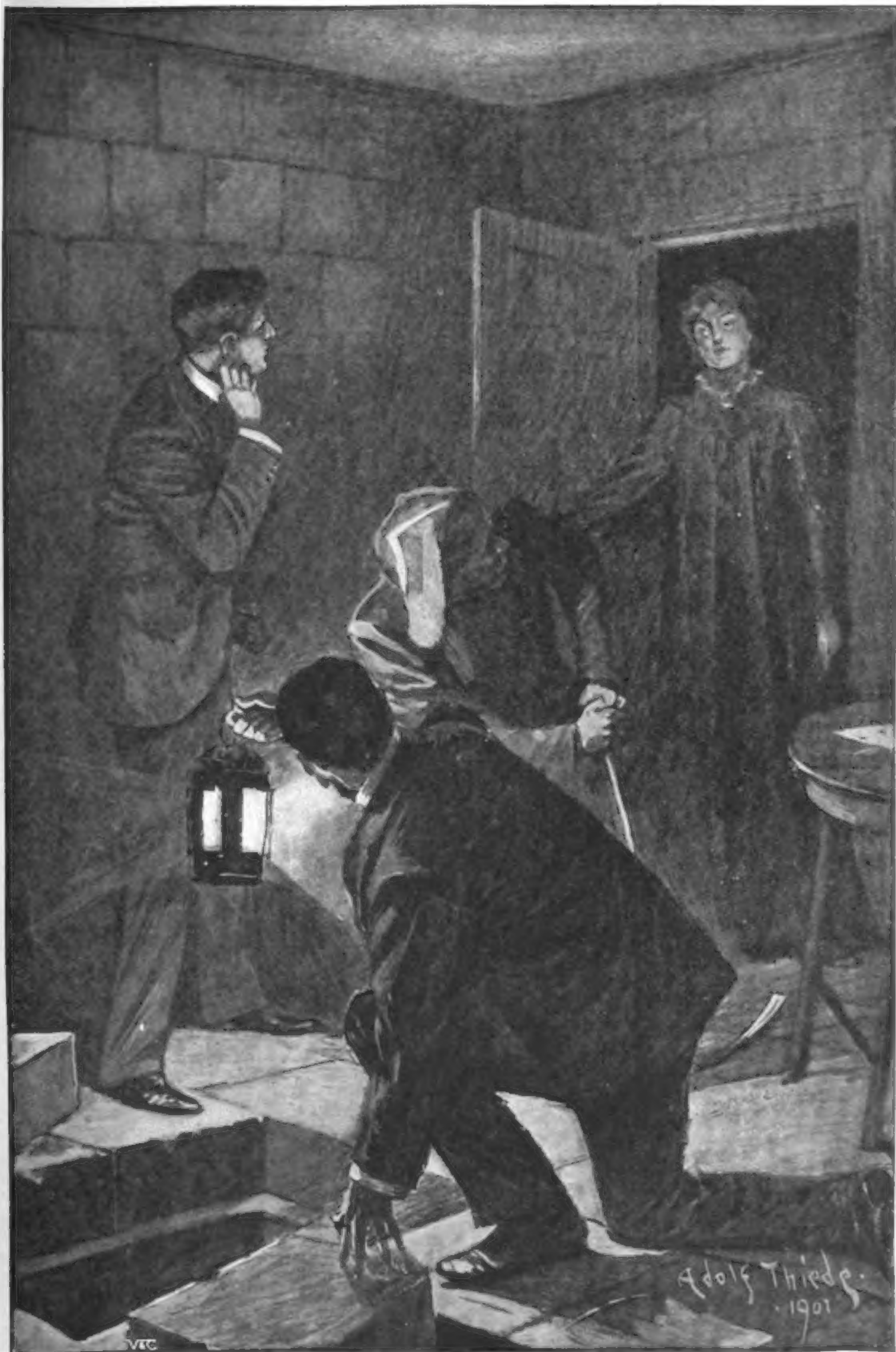
She came very close to me now, and her full, dark eyes glittered into my face.

"Have you discovered the treasure, Mr. Phenays?" she repeated.

I nodded. I could not speak.

"Then you will find that even your enemies are grateful. Come! You and I will lead the way. I hated you and planned your death. You also hated me and would have ruined me had you been able; but this atones for all. Come!"

She took the hand which hung limp at my side. I could no more have resisted her than the paralysed bird resists the cobra. She led the way to the narrow opening. We went down the passage. It widened as we



"The stately figure of Mademoiselle Delacourt herself appeared on the threshold."

progressed. At last we reached the other end. Mademoiselle's small hand held mine in a grip of iron. When we came to the end of the passage, Da Costa raised his lantern and uttered a cry, which echoed and reverberated oddly. There were four of us in the opening which my discovery had led to—Mademoiselle, Da Costa, his assistant, and myself. We found ourselves standing on the edge of a deep well some four feet in diameter. As we approached, Da Costa lowered the lantern into the well. The air was foul, but not sufficiently tainted to put out the light. The well was from fifteen to sixteen feet in depth. Its walls were smooth and glistening. I noticed that about half way down, bulging into the wall, was an old piece of piping. Before I had time to say anything about this, the man who had helped Da Costa brought forward a rope, put it round the waist of the Portuguese, and lowered him into the well. He reached the bottom, fumbled about there, and presently I heard him utter a shout.

Mademoiselle, bending forward, asked him if he had found it.

"Yes!" he cried. "Yes! Enough treasure to keep us rich for the remainder of our lives. I'll take some with me, and will return for the rest."

"Then come at once," she said. "Take enough, but come at once. There is not a moment to lose."

The assistant hauled Da Costa up. When he reached the surface he slapped his pocket. It rattled.

"Ah! Mademoiselle," he said, "we are rich now."

"And we owe it to Mr. Phenays," she replied.

She turned towards me, her face white as death, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

I was just about to reply to her, when a terrific crash at the back of my head caused thousands of Catherine-wheels to dance before my eyes, and I remembered no more.

When I came to myself I was in pitch darkness. For a time I could recall nothing. Then memory returned. I knew where I was. I had been flung to the bottom of the well. I shouted for all I was worth, but without the least hope of anyone hearing me. I realised, when too late, that I had been the victim of the worst conspiracy Mademoiselle had yet formed against me. She had at last absolutely and completely succeeded in accomplishing my ruin. She had already, to all intents and purposes, committed murder, for there was nothing before me but

death by slow starvation. By my death I should be the means of her salvation. She, who knew everything, had heard of my latent talent and of its strange development. She had seized her opportunity to lure my secret from me for her own purpose. Senhora Lello Mendez was a name adopted for her own purposes by this extraordinary and awful woman. She meant to steal the treasure from the old house, and, in making me her tool, she would also compass the long-desired event of my death. Pinheiro's name had been only used to trap, to lure me into the net. But how Mademoiselle had contrived to extract a letter from him was beyond my wildest endeavours to discover.

I paced round and round my narrow and dreadful prison. Suddenly I remembered that I had a box of matches with me. I struck one and tried to examine my place of confinement. Many feet above me loomed the black circle of the mouth of the well. The sides were smooth and slippery, and offered not the slightest help for fingers or feet. I could just trace the piece of piping at one of the junctions. That was all. I was trapped like a rat in a hole. Here was I buried beneath a cellar in a strange house, in a foreign city. No one would miss me. No one could possibly guess where I was. I remembered also that it was Sunday morning, and if the house was used as a codfish store, it would not be entered till Monday morning. Even then it was a thousand to one against my being found, for my shouts would scarcely penetrate the thick walls which choked down my voice as with a blanket.

When the first shock of terror passed, there came that wild desire for life which God has implanted in the breasts of men. It is, in a certain sense, one of the most terrible of our passions. I only hope that I may never feel it again. I was young to die. I did not want to die—to die thus in the dark, and alone, of hunger and starvation. What fate could be more horrible? To die unmourned, unmissed, with that one terrible woman—that fiend in human shape—triumphing over my early doom! I struck another match, but the flame died out.

For hours and hours I sat crouched at the bottom of the well, until at last came that merciful stupor which visits men in such situations. Then, again, that passed. I became wide awake, alert, and full of the most desperate resolution. All my thoughts centred on Pinheiro. I thought of him so earnestly, so long, with such passion, that I forgot that there was another human being

in the world. It seemed to me that when I thought of him I saw a light, and that light went far, penetrating beyond the gloom of my dungeon, through the walls of the old house, shining on and on, till it reached his palace in the fashionable part of Lisbon. At the end of that long line of whiteness I saw Pinheiro himself. He was in his study; he was thinking hard; he was seated by his huge writing-desk. He took up a paper and examined it. He started, and looked at it more fully. His face became agitated. He paced the room. Then a look of resolution filled it. He hurried from the room, closing the door after him.

In his footsteps I seemed to see eagerness



"Stood for a minute or two on the edge."

and a wild desire to obtain an object, and at once. When he disappeared, the light also faded.

I leapt to my feet and began to pray earnestly. Had I seen a vision? Was my brain going? I prayed once, twice, many times. I think I must have been partly delirious, for after my prayer I opened my knife and began with all my force to stab the walls above my head. They were hard, and the point of the blade snapped at once. Again I prayed for deliverance; again I stabbed the walls with the stump of my broken knife.

Suddenly I felt myself drenched with a gush of water. It poured into the well in

a cascade; it increased every moment. I uttered a cry of despair, for I thought I should be drowned in this ghastly hole. In and in the water poured with increasing force. It smelt foully as it splashed and eddied around me. In five minutes it was up to my waist; in another five it reached my chin; and then—the most marvellous thing happened. I was floated gently to the mouth of the well. If that was not Providence, I don't know what was.

I had evidently cut through the junction of the pipe in my blind fury, and had liberated the water from the river. I scrambled out of the well and stood for a minute or two, drenched and trembling, on the edge. It was just then that I heard sounds in the room above me. A scuffling noise—men's voices. Then a woman's loud and despairing shriek. These sounds were followed by silence.

Two minutes later a light—not fancied, but real—penetrated my gloom. Footsteps came hastily down the narrow passage, and Pinheiro, with blood on his shirt and cuffs, stood before me.

"Phenays," he said, "I thought I should find you here. By all that is wonderful, what brought you back to Lisbon?"

"Your letter!" I gasped. "The letter you wrote to me and sent by Da Costa."

"Then I understand the marks on the blotting-paper," he answered. "Come."

I looked him in the face and tried to speak, but consciousness for the second time that day forsook me.

When I came to myself I was lying on a sofa in Pinheiro's house. He was standing close to me, holding a glass of strong stimulant in his hand.

"Here," he said, "drink this. You are an unlucky beggar! But tell me quite quietly what has happened. Take your own time; there's no hurry. Whatever your perils, they are now at an end. Take your time."

I gasped out my miserable story as best I could.

"But why did you write to me?" I said in conclusion. "I should never have come but for your letter."

"The letter was a forgery," he replied. "I remember my servant telling me one day that a lady had called to see me on business, had asked to wait for me, but in the end had gone away before I returned. She gave her name as Senhora Lello Mendez. Now, I knew that there was such a lady, although she does not live in Lisbon, to whom the old house Casa dos Bicos belongs, and thought nothing

about the visit, hoping to see the Senhora later on. How could I suppose that another terrible plot, with a double object, was on foot? But now listen. I have good news for you. We have at last and in very truth secured our enemy. Mademoiselle Delacourt is lying under arrest in this city, and, clever as she is, she cannot escape from her prison walls."

"But pardon me," I interrupted; "how was it that you thought of coming to the rescue?"

"The most extraordinary thing. I was in my study, busily engaged; but I could not set to work, for my thoughts reverted to the past. I told you once, Phenays, that I would give you the history of these lost fingers"—he held up his mutilated hand as he spoke. "There was a woman whom I loved—ah! madly. She got into the power of that fiend—I was too late to save her life, but in rescuing her body I lost these fingers. Enough! I will tell you more later on. The thought brings madness even now. A Portuguese never loses sight of the object of his vengeance. Old memories drove me wild this morning. I could not work; I idly turned the pages of my blotter. There I saw traces of a letter which I knew I had not written. It is true it was to all appearance in my handwriting; but the words were not mine. This is what I read:—

"MY DEAR PHENAYS,—The bearer, Senhor da Costa, a native of Lisbon and a friend of mine, has just been to see me in connection with a document and diagram which he believes to be of great value.' Lower down I read the words, 'as this is very much in your line, I would send him to you.' And then again, 'If you can do anything to help Da Costa, you will oblige me.'

"This was enough. I happened to know

Da Costa as a scoundrel of the deepest dye. A diagram in connection with the treasure in the Casa dos Bicos has long been puzzling all our antiquaries, and a feeling of overmastering fear came upon me—that you had been deluded into coming to Lisbon, that you were now in that infernal house. I rushed there, as it turned out, just in time. Mademoiselle had passed herself off as Senhora Lello Mendez. She had secured a portion of the celebrated treasure, and all would have gone well for her, but for the fact that she and her assistants began to quarrel as to the division of the spoils. I took the precaution not to go to that house alone. I had some emissaries of the police with me. We quickly secured Mademoiselle, who had long been wanted. The men, in their desperation, fought like furies. But they, too, were secured and handcuffed. In their terror they gave themselves away, describing your hiding-place and where they had found the treasure. Well, I saved your life and captured our enemy, and the treasure will find its way eventually to the old lady who is the real Senhora Lello Mendez, and who lives in a remote part of the country."

Pinheiro ceased speaking. I sat still, with thoughts too deep for words.

Thus ended the strange mysteries, the inexplicable horrors, which dogged my steps for the greater part of one year. Mademoiselle Delacourt will never trouble me again.

As to the diamonds, the real Senhora Lello Mendez, having heard the entire story, presented me with one to set in a ring, and I always wear it on my finger.

When the well was pumped out, three hundred more Brazilian diamonds were found. Thus came to an end the worst of all my adventures—that which found me at the bottom of the well in the old house Casa dos Bicos.

